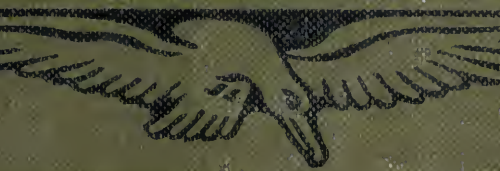


The
ALBATROSS
◆ NOVELS ◆



STRANGER
THAN
FICTION



ALBERT ROSS

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STRANGER THAN FICTION.

BY ALBERT ROSS.

AUTHOR OF

· THE NAKED TRUTH," " HIS FOSTER SISTER,"
" A NEW SENSATION," " WHY I'M SINGLE,"
" HIS PRIVATE CHARACTER," ETC.



NEW YORK:

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TO MY READERS.

Doubtless it is due to the fact that my first novel had such an extraordinary success that I have confined my subsequent writings so largely to the same stupendous theme. Occasionally, however, I have gone outside that path, particularly in "Speaking of Ellen" and "His Foster Sister," and an over-indulgent public has shown no diminution of its kindness.

In the following pages I have once more experimented in the field of mystery, and particularly in that of conscience. If my efforts prove satisfactory I may extend them further along these lines.

During the past nine months, while travelling in the islands of the Pacific, and particularly in Japan, I have planned a novel which shall introduce some of the strange and fascinating scenes through which I am passing. I hope by next July to present you with such a volume, but I dare make no promises. I have found that an author's pen takes fancies of its own, which he cannot always control.

I have been astonished and gratified to discover that my readers reach even to these shores, as I found them by the Adriatic and the Caribbean. With fervent wishes for a happy New Year to all,

I am, as ever, your friend,

Shanghai, Nov., 1899.

ALBERT ROSS.

STRANGER THAN FICTION.

CHAPTER I.

VICTOR LOSES HIS TEMPER.

VICTOR HALL, aged 22, stood in the office of Cyrus Keith, attorney-at-law, in the presence of that gentleman, and gave way to a violent exhibition of temper. They were good friends and the ill-feeling of the young man was not directed at the lawyer but at a third person not present. Victor's usually clear brow was ruffled and his dark eyes glittered from between their half-closed lids. With his hat tipped back on his well-shaped head and both hands deep in his trousers pockets, he ground his white teeth together and looked as if he would like to strike somebody with the fists that moved nervously in their receptacles.

"That's your opinion, is it?" he cried, breathing heavily. "You believe as a matter of law that Dick Morse can hang on to my property, whether I like it or not, and if he steals the whole of it before his time runs out I have no redress whatever!"

Mr. Keith responded in a composed tone that this

was a fairly accurate statement of the decision at which he had reluctantly arrived.

"When your father died, Victor," he said, in a grave voice, "he left his entire estate to your mother, knowing that she would use whatever she thought right on your maintenance and education. It probably never entered his head that she would so soon leave you an orphan. When she learned that her time was short she made her own will, as she had a perfect legal right to do, and tied up the property in a way she believed best for you. She provided that you were to receive the income only until you reached the age of thirty years, and that Mr. Morse was to act as trustee without giving bonds for the faithful performance of his duties. The same sort of testament is made every day. Morse accepted the position and has, up to this time, carried out the stipulations of the will. Deducting a reasonable charge for his services he has paid over to you various sums from time to time. He has now nearly eight years left before he can do anything more, unless ordered to by the court. In my opinion no judge would make such an order, and an attempt to secure it would end in certain failure. Unpleasant as this may be, I am obliged to answer your question.

Mr. Hall drew one of his fists out of the pocket that contained it and brought it down on the office desk before Mr. Keith, with a resounding blow.

"And yet you know, as you sit there," he said, bitterly, "that you have not enough faith in the man to trust him with a hundred dollars."

The lawyer nodded assent.

"Admitting it, for the sake of argument, what influence would my opinion, unsupported by a scintilla of fact, have on that of the judge? If there was anything we could bring forward except our private suspicions, it would be a different story. These are the facts. Richard Morse was selected by your mother to manage this estate, after an acquaintance with him extending over a number of years. While she lived he was her confidential business agent. She believed she could trust him with this important matter. He has never been, as you admit, a day behind in his payments out of the receipts. You have no proof that his life is other than that of a decent, respectable citizen. His business, that of an insurance agent, shows that he has a standing in the community and that his honesty is taken as a matter of course by people with large interests.

"At the same time, you and I have an instinctive feeling that there is something crooked in his make-up, and neither of us is pleased at his hold over your little patrimony. That is all we could say if we brought a suit against him. Courts are very guarded in interfering with trustees appointed in accordance with the requests of a will. My dear Victor, I am sorry, but if you want to make a move predestined to failure you must do it through some other attorney and against my advice."

Mr. Hall pressed his hand against his breast and expelled the air violently from his lungs.

"I'll get one, then," he said, with a shake of the head. "If I'm going to lose all I have in the world

I'll make the court responsible for it. When I find I'm a beggar it'll be some satisfaction to go to a judge and say, 'I warned you of the kind of man you've let rob me!' It's not in my blood to stand still and have my throat cut without a protest."

Mr. Keith did not attempt to influence the decision of his impetuous friend. He busied himself with some papers that lay on his desk, as if he had dismissed the matter from his mind. Mr. Hall waited a moment, then turned on his heel and strode toward the door that opened into the hallway. Pausing, he swung about and remarked in a querulous tone, "You don't say anything."

"What's the use? I understood you wanted the best advice I had to give, and you've got it. Apparently you prefer to be your own counsellor. You've heard the proverb, 'A man who tries to be his own lawyer has a fool for a client.'"

"You must admit that it's a nasty situation."

"There's no question about that."

"I could bring fifty men who wouldn't trust Dick Morse with a dollar. Wouldn't that be of any influence in showing the kind of man he is?"

Mr. Keith smiled and asked soberly how many men Hall knew, who, though they might admit that they held this opinion—in a private conversation—would be willing to go on a witness stand and swear to it. They would crawl out of the dilemma like rats from a sinking ship. Most of them would have to acknowledge that their property was insured in companies of

which Morse was agent. In the hands of a shrewd cross-examiner they would appear ridiculous.

"No, Victor, it wouldn't work," he added, solemnly.

"Then it amounts to this—I must have my pocket picked without making an effort to save myself! A rascal can hide behind his 'legal rights' and I am helpless. I've a great mind to walk into his office and make him give up his plunder with my hands on his damned gullet!"

There was so little likelihood that the young man would do anything of the sort that the lawyer was not much disturbed. He was moved, however, to ask if his client had made any attempt to persuade Morse to surrender his trust peaceably.

"No, I haven't. My feelings are such that I don't care to hold any conversation with him. He's a great deal too oily for me. Say," added Mr. Hall, struck by a new idea, "won't *you* go as my representative and state the case in your own words? You wouldn't fly in a rage, as I might, if he stuck and wouldn't do a thing. Perhaps you could persuade or scare him into turning over the stuff—if he's really got any of it left, which I doubt. That's the best scheme yet. Put on your hat and run over, and I'll wait here till you come back."

This Mr. Keith did not seem in haste to do. He dwelt on the disagreeable nature of the proposed interview, which would amount to announcing that the honesty of the trustee was called in question. After a long talk, however, he finally consented to see Mr.

Morse and ask him such questions as he deemed best, depending on the attitude that person assumed.

"And if he tries any cheap evasions, will you hit him one, right on the proboscis?" asked the visitor, half in earnest.

"That would be a little out of my line."

"I'll do it myself, if he drives me to it," said Mr. Hall, growing angry again. "He'll give you no satisfaction, I feel it in my bones, but I want you to try. I'd pay half he's keeping from me to have him alone in a room for just ten minutes."

When his client finally left him to himself Mr. Keith buried his face in his hands and thought for an hour on the subject of their conversation. He recalled the day when Mrs. Hall sent for him to come to her bedside and told him how he was to draw her will. He had been her legal adviser as well as the close friend of her husband, but she had turned to Richard Morse for counsel in everything pecuniary. When she stipulated that Morse was to be trustee of the property she wanted to will to her son the lawyer was nevertheless a little surprised.

He felt it his duty to ask if she was perfectly sure Morse was a suitable person to entrust with this duty but when she asked, "Have you any cause to doubt it?" he was obliged to answer that he could give no satisfactory reason for the inquiry. He drew the will as she wished it, saw that it was properly signed and attested, and after her death presented it to the court. Victor at that time was a boy of sixteen, and it was

not till several years after that he began to express fears of the honesty of the trustee.

Morse occupied a peculiar position in Stromberg, the Illinois town in which our history opens. He had come there some years before and purchased the business of the principal insurance agent, who was obliged to remove to a milder climate on account of his health. As is common in such cases the patrons of the old concern continued their insurance with the new agent, depending rather upon the solidity of his companies than upon him. Being thus well established new business came also and he continued to have by far the largest line of insurance of any agent in the vicinity.

And yet there was something about the man that caused the feeling which troubled Victor Hall to lodge in the minds of many other people. When Mrs. Hall gave her estate into his hands without bonds a murmur of surprise swept through the community. Nobody else would have thought of putting such faith in Richard Morse. He did not seem the type of man usually selected for that sort of confidence. If asked to give a reason for this impression no other answer could be obtained than a strong impression. But it was general, practically universal, and Mr. Hall heard expressions of sympathy from nearly every one who had any cause—or no cause—to say anything about the matter.

While he remained at school Victor cared little and thought less about the pecuniary status in which he found himself. When he became of age, however, and the importance of Mr. Morse's relation to him became more evident, he grew uneasy and finally worked him-

self up to the heat in which we have just found him. He was usually a very quiet and courteous young man, and no ordinary affair would have thrown him into such a state of temper.

All this came back to Mr. Keith as he revolved the question in his mind and tried to find some avenue of escape from the disagreeable situation. He thought of Mr. Morse in every aspect of his visible life. Thirty years of age, of quiet dress and manner, so polite in his intercourse with people that more than one used the expression applied by Mr. Hall, and called him "oily."

He walked through the world as if wearing a pair of velvet slippers. Whatever may have reached his ears of the hateful things said, no one could remember hearing a word from him that implied criticism of others. He was always to be found at his office during the usual hours and everything connected with his business was as shipshape as if a committee from the various insurance companies was hourly expected, to make a searching examination of his books.

Although he was not a member of any church and never prated about religion, he was generally found on Sunday at one of the houses of worship in town, taking whatever seat the usher assigned him and always putting a substantial coin in the box when it was passed his way.

Many of the business men of Stromberg drove fast horses and some of them had other articles that might also be termed fast, drawing upon their purses; not so, as far as anybody knew, had Morse. Many took "fly-

ers" in the stock market; never he. Some reeled home occasionally late at night the worse for drink; Mr. Morse was to all appearance a total abstainer, though he never forced his prejudices in this respect or any other upon people who differed from him.

The more Mr. Attorney Keith reflected upon these things the more doubtful he became as to the outcome of the interview he had promised unwillingly to have with this man. There seemed absolutely no ground on which to base a demand that Morse surrender his trust, and men are not likely, as a rule, to give up an appointment of that kind merely because they are asked to do so; the request would in itself be construed as a reflection upon the trustee and if complied with would place him in a bad position before the public.

All the same the lawyer did not in the least change the opinion he had expressed to his young friend, that Morse was not the type of person in whom one would place implicit confidence. If he could find any excuse to suggest that he resign he would be only too glad to avail himself of it.

The result of long thought was to leave Mr. Keith just about where he was when he began. He decided to approach Morse in a friendly manner and trust to luck. There would be nothing remarkable in a lawyer who had represented two generations of the Hall family asking, as the attorney of the surviving one, to be shown the exact condition of the estate, and to be given proofs that the property was as represented. Keith could hardly expect this slow, subtle man to furnish evidence on which to base anything substan-

tial, unless the worst that was feared had already happened.

The next day, therefore, without sending word of his intended visit, which he thought unnecessary, Mr. Keith entered Mr. Morse's office early in the morning and was met by that gentleman with the impassive face that all his acquaintances knew so well. The extended hand of the visitor was touched by his cold, unresponsive fingers and then, a chair being offered and accepted, Mr. Keith got down to business.

CHAPTER II.

"SHE WEARS A RING I GAVE HER."

"I BELIEVE, Mr. Morse, you hold some property in trust for a young friend of mine, Victor Hall."

Mr. Morse bowed with slow deliberation. If he had any suspicion as to the move Mr. Keith contemplated he gave no outward sign of it.

"Representing Mr. Hall, and being an old friend of his father's before him, I would like to know exactly how that property is at present invested."

Mr. Morse bowed again, in the same manner as before. Then, asking to be excused a moment, he went to an inner office, where two clerks were at work, and leaving the portal ajar, asked one of them to open the safe. The clerk left his writing, applied himself to the combination, and when he had finished returned to his work. Mr. Morse put his hand immediately on a brown paper parcel, neatly tied with blue tape, and returned to Mr. Keith with it in his hand. The parcel was of the shape in which legal documents are usually filed, being something like ten inches long, three or four inches wide, and an inch and a half in thickness.

"Everything is in this package," said Mr. Morse, laying it on the table in front of the lawyer. "Examine it all you please, take whatever notes you desire

—there is stationery in the table drawer—and touch that bell when you have finished. I shall be in the next room writing some letters.”

Surely nothing could seem more open and above-board than this procedure and the lawyer reddened slightly as he compared the action with the attitude he was himself compelled to assume. He responded in as pleasant a tone as possible that he was much obliged, and proceeded to untie the tape, which was neatly secured in a bow-knot. Drawing a sheet of paper from the indicated receptacle, he took up a pen and dipped it in the inkstand before him. Then he copied as his first line the words he found on the outside of the package, written in the neat and legible hand of Mr. Morse, which he recognized without difficulty:

“Property of Victor Hall, held in trust by Richard A. Morse, under the will of Martha Hall, deceased.”

The parcel contained bonds of various railroads and other corporations, all standing high in the confidence of the public; what were, in short, known as “gilt-edged” investments. If Mr. Keith had been asked to name the safest securities for a trust estate he would have mentioned most of these without hesitation. When the list was copied in full he tied up the package again as nearly as possible as before, and touched the little hand-bell that stood on the table.

Mr. Morse’s face exhibited neither pleasure nor dissatisfaction as he re-entered the lawyer’s presence. It was the same impassive countenance that everybody in Stromberg knew so well.

"I am much obliged to you," said Mr. Keith, pushing the parcel toward him with a slight motion. "Those are very solid securities, Mr. Morse. What do they average annually?"

"About four per cent. I could secure a larger rate, but safety of the principal is the first thing to be thought of. All of them, I believe, have appreciated in value since they were purchased, which will help to offset the low income. I kept, of course, an account, during Mr. Hall's minority, of the receipts, and of my expenditures for him, which I gave him with the balance remaining; on his twenty-first birthday. Since then I have handed or sent him the net income quarterly."

It was something of a relief to the investigator to have the trustee assume this impassive demeanor, but he could not quite overcome the feeling that Morse must know the suspicion which had prompted his visit.

"I suppose you would be equally willing to show these papers to Mr. Hall, if he should come with me or by himself to see them?" he inquired, rising.

"At any time. If I am not in you can ask Mr. Brown, my clerk, to open the safe for you. I will give him instructions. As I do not think it wise for two persons to have the combination of a safe, I always have Mr. Brown open mine for me, and I will tell him to do the same for you or Mr. Hall."

Such perfect fairness and confidence almost took the lawyer's breath away. He was glad when the interview was terminated. At his office he found Victor

awaiting him with impatience, and as soon as he could recover his balance Mr. Keith related the particulars just narrated.

"If he had been expecting to bring in his final account and close up the trusteeship this morning, he could not have had anything in more perfect order," he said, in closing.

"I wish he *was* expecting it," growled Mr. Hall, apparently no more pleased than before. "I suppose you are convinced now that all my apprehensions are groundless?"

"No, Victor. Even in the face of that remarkably clear exhibit I am just as doubtful of him as I was before. It may be I am wrong; I hope I am; but that's the way I feel and, like you, I am unable to give anything more than a strong impression for my fear."

"And you still think there's no remedy?"

"I am sorry to say I do."

The younger man muttered something beneath his breath that, judging by the expression of his face, was not of a pleasant nature.

"I'll tell you what I've decided on, then," he said, when he could find utterance. "I'm going to leave this part of the country and begin the task of making a living for myself in some State where nobody ever saw or heard of me. I've got a little something saved, thank Goodness! and I can get along for awhile without much other income. I'm a beggar, or shall be, and I might as well look the thing straight in the eye."

Mr. Keith drummed with his fingers on his desk in a way he had when absorbed in thought. He didn't

know that he could conscientiously advise his young friend against the course he had outlined. Sometimes it was the best thing for a fellow to be thrown on his own innate resources and learn to develop the best that was in him without exterior aid. Victor had never shown any inclination toward dissipation, so far as he knew. He had a fairly good head on his shoulders and had graduated from school with fair rank. He thought of all these things as he inquired if Mr. Hall had any definite destination in view.

"I'm going further west. Horace Greeley's advice is still worth following. In a new country a man is taken for what he is, not for what his ancestors were. I can put my shoulder to the wheel and push without being discouraged by whispers that I wasn't born for hard work, and that if I had my rights I could start out with a decent capital and do wonderful things. And there's another reason, Keith, and it's more important than you think, too. I've been developing a dangerous sentiment toward that villain across the street. It's no joke to say that I've been on the point of climbing his stairs and knocking the stuffing out of him a dozen times, within the past month. Of course I should get the worst of it, for I would be breaking the law and might get inside a jail to pay for my amusement; but when I think of the way he—"

The young man broke off suddenly, his voice choking with suppressed rage. The lawyer felt no inclination to smile. He could see there was something in the statement to which he had just listened.

"I believe you are going to do the best thing, Vic-

tor," he answered, firmly. "Even if we've misjudged this man—if your property is handed to you all right and straight when you are thirty years old—no harm can be done by putting your best foot forward between now and then. If he turns out to be the fraud we fear, you'll be glad you didn't waste eight of your best years waiting for something that never came. I hate to have you go—I feel almost as if you were a son of my own, you know that very well—but no selfishness should be put into the scale. All I want to say is, you must call on me for anything I can do, pecuniary or otherwise, just as freely as if we were indeed father and son."

Impetuously Victor Hall stretched out his hand and grasped that of his friend.

"You would do anything for me, Keith; I know that; but I hope there'll be no need of imposing on your generosity as far as money is concerned. I've got a good deal of grit, and the life I intend to lead ought to bring it out. There's one thing I do want to impress on you, though. When I leave Stromberg you'll be the only person here who'll have my address. I shall shut the rest of them as absolutely out of my life as if I had gone off in a balloon and landed on the planet Mars. If you're ever asked where I am, convey the idea that you don't know. When you answer my letters, mail your replies at some point outside this town."

To this Mr. Keith responded that he would do as requested, but added that there was one other person

in Stromberg, he presumed, who would be exempted from the sweeping statement he had heard.

"Gertrude Felton," he explained, when Hall asked whom he meant.

An expression of pain flitted across the other's brow, and he closed his eyes for an instant as if to shut out a disagreeable sight.

"No, I shall see her for the last time before I leave here," said he, in a low voice. "I didn't mean to bring her name into our conversation, but now it's done I may as well tell you all. You know Oscar Felton. You know he's the richest man in Stromberg, though he came here poor as any one. He would never give his daughter to a man with no expectations. Now, Keith, you have the secret of my intense anxiety to get hold of the \$40,000 Dick Morse keeps from me. With that for a beginning I might return in a few years fitted from a pecuniary standpoint to marry Gerty Felton; without it the chances are very small, indeed. I can't wear my heart out in a hopeless dream. I have renounced her with the rest, and to-night I'm going to make her a final call and say good-by."

"Don't be too impetuous. You are both young. A hundred things may happen."

"I can't endure it, I tell you!" cried Hall. "Mr. Felton has the same idea as everybody else around town—that I'll never see the color of my money from Dick Morse. He has hinted it two or three times, with enough added to let me see plainly how the wind blows with him. Gerty is a dear girl. I won't stand in the way of letting her find happiness with some one

else, like a dog in the manger. No, don't say a word, my mind's made up."

There are emergencies when the advice of a member of the bar is of no more value than that of an ordinary layman, and Mr. Keith felt that in a case like this it was not best to say too much. So he contented himself by repeating his caution not to act precipitately, and to remember that the cards in the game of life could be shuffled so as to come out in many different ways.

"I don't like to seem inquisitive," he added, "but are you and she engaged?"

"In a way we are; she wears a ring I gave her, but I shall ask it back. I shall tell her I am going away from town, and don't know when I shall return."

Mr. Keith shook his head sagely.

"Do you think she'll let you go like that?" he asked. "No, she'll expect you to tell her your address, and she'll write you there."

"But I don't know it myself!" said Victor, with a touch of his old impatience. "If she asks me to write when I get settled I shall have to make some evasive reply, I suppose. Oh, it's enough to drive me crazy, this whole business! If I don't get out of town pretty soon they'll have to carry me to an asylum!"

He turned, as if he could not bear to discuss the matter a second longer, and left the office, followed by the pitying glances of his friend.

CHAPTER III.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

DURING the rest of the day, Mr. Hall completed the few arrangements necessary to close his connection with the town of Stromberg. A single man can change his domicile with little trouble. There were only his things to pack and a few bills to pay. He meant to take the midnight train, to attract as little attention as possible.

When the shades of evening had fallen he took his way slowly toward the more aristocratic end of the town and opened the gate of a handsome residence. His heart beat uneasily and he dreaded the interview for which he had come. For several years his feelings toward Gertrude Felton had been of a tender nature. The happiest moments he could recall had been passed in her company. He had builded, sometimes, a radiant future in which they two were linked in indissoluble bonds. All this, he felt with sadness, was now to end. He must force himself to say farewell. It was the hardest thing that lay before him in the new life on which he had decided.

Hardly had the gate closed noiselessly behind the young man, when the door of the mansion opened and a portly form emerged. Mr. Hall knew well the

owner of that form and wished he could avoid the meeting that was imminent. An instant later they exchanged greetings that were not over cordial. Each considered the other a menace to his peace of mind and acted accordingly.

Mr. Hall said "Good evening," in a perfunctory tone and received a reply in the same words, delivered in the same manner. But before he reached the gate Mr. Felton turned and spoke again.

"Just a word, if you please."

Victor turned and faced the speaker and for nearly a minute nothing more was spoken.

"It is well known to you," said the elder man, at last, "that your calls on my daughter are not agreeable to me. Let me ask, then, why you continue them?"

"Instead of replying directly, sir, let me say that I have come to bid Miss Felton farewell. I intend to leave Stromberg."

An expression of decided relief came into the father's face.

"In that case," he remarked, insinuatingly, "what need is there of calling? A note would, I should think, answer every purpose; or, if you choose, I will say to her what you have told me."

There was another brief silence. Mr. Hall's eyes were bent on the ground and his breast heaved.

"Mr. Felton," he said at last, "I have known Gertrude several years. We have been good friends. After to-night it is unlikely that I shall ever see her again. Do you forbid my speaking to her—for the last time?"

"No, I do not forbid it; I only ask you to consider whether it is wise. To be candid, Mr. Hall, it has long been evident to you that your attentions to Gertrude have not met my approval. I do not know what your intentions may have been, but frequent association between young people whose future stations must be far apart—I say only what you realize, I have no doubt—is not of advantage to—to either. We cannot help the silly talk of gossips. I have even been asked by persons who could not, apparently, see the absurdity of the question, if you were 'engaged' to my daughter. Such things are not only a source of great annoyance to me, but they may prove an injury to my child. She will inherit a large fortune and it is only reasonable to suppose that when she makes a matrimonial alliance it will be with a gentleman similarly situated. To receive you as she has done, to be seen in your company, to have her name coupled with yours (I cast no reflections upon you, Mr. Hall), was at least very injudicious. So I ask you, if you are going away, why not drop the matter exactly where it is? Some one may learn—news spreads so rapidly in small towns—that one of your last calls was at my house, and the tongue of rumor will be let loose again."

The cheek of Mr. Hall burned as he listened. The remarks were galling to his sensitive pride as well as painful to him from another standpoint.

"Mr. Felton," he answered, controlling himself with a great effort, "you are a much older man than I; you are also the father of a young lady I highly esteem;

both reasons make me wish to treat you with the greatest respect. I must remind you, however, that *you* came to Stromberg penniless and that it was *my* father to whose kindness you owed your first rise in life. What do you think he would say if he heard you taunt his son with being unfit to enter your house, merely because fortune has dealt more kindly with you than with him?"

The hands of the elder man were raised deprecatingly.

"That is a very harsh way to describe a desire for a daughter's happiness," he protested. "I do not say you are unfit to enter my house, nothing of the kind. The fact that I have never forbidden you to come here proves that I have no such thought. As to the assistance rendered me by your father I have never forgotten it nor ceased to be grateful for it. He loaned me a small sum of money, which I repaid with interest. It was to a certain extent a business transaction, by which he lost nothing. To use it at this late day as an excuse to alter the arrangement of my family affairs is extraordinary, to say the least."

Smarting under the strain until he could hardly hold his tongue, Mr. Hall turned abruptly toward the gate.

"I shall not enter your house after what you have said," he remarked, pausing. "That will please you, I have no doubt, even if it wounds a sweet girl whose friendship I hoped to retain in my distant home. I only ask you to tell Gerty why I left Stromberg without a parting word, after the pleasant relations she and I have sustained so long."

The satisfaction of the father was too evident to be concealed.

"I will tell her to-morrow," he said. "Let me add my personal thanks for your very wise decision. It is much better than if you had even sent her a note as I at first suggested. Very much better."

Mr. Hall shrank as if stung by a poisonous reptile.

"You are afraid to trust your own child," he exclaimed, bitterly. "You believe she loves me, and that, were I to say the word, she would go with me as my wife, whether you gave your consent or not!"

The rich man fumbled nervously with a massive watchchain that hung across his black waistcoat.

"You say you expect to leave town to-night," said he, as if anxious to get further from that view of the subject. "Have you decided where you are to locate?"

"Without intending to be impolite I must answer that it is none of your business," retorted Victor, impatiently.

Mr. Felton bit at his finger nails.

"I have heard that you think of adopting the legal profession?"

"I must answer again that it is no concern of yours what I do or where I go."

"I only wanted to say—and you must not get angry with me—that if you find an opening where you can use a few thousand dollars to advantage—I am not unmindful of what your father did for me—"

Unable to bear any more, Mr. Hall bolted, leaving the perplexed gentleman standing alone. This seemed

the hardest of all the troubles he had had during the past few weeks. To throw him the offer of financial aid, after barring him from his door, was adding insult to injury.

Mr. Felton waited until the form of the other was out of sight, and then slowly retraced his steps. Taking a pass-key from his pocket he re-entered his residence and, ringing for a servant, requested that she ask Gertrude to come to the library. Mrs. Felton had deceased some years before and there was no one to share his responsibility with him.

Gertrude came running lightly down the stairs. When she entered her father's presence she came to his side and, putting an arm around his neck, kissed him on the cheek. She was dressed in a gown of light material, very becoming to her blonde beauty, and had some bright-colored flowers in a corsage bouquet.

"You look as if dressed for company," said Mr. Felton, with a desire to gain time.

"I do expect a caller, papa dear," she answered, kissing him again. "Victor Hall telephoned me this afternoon that he would run in for a little while this evening."

He held her off at arm's length and looked at her face searchingly.

"You know I don't like him," he said, simply.

"But, papa, he's a very nice young man—and we've known each other a long time—and—"

She could not look into the eyes he bent so questioningly on her.

"Gertrude, I have let you have your way in almost

everything since your mother left us," said he, gravely. "You are now twenty years old and should yield to my superior judgment in matters of this kind. If Mr. Hall calls here to-night you must make an excuse not to see him."

"Papa !"

"If you have any doubt of being able to obey me, I shall remain in and go to the door myself."

Miss Felton burst into tears and for a long time could not speak intelligibly. Afterwards she tried every art of which she was mistress to induce her father to mitigate the rigorousness of his decision, but without avail. He talked to her of the position she was entitled to in society, of the high alliance that would naturally be hers, of the improbability that Victor Hall would ever reach the social and financial level that would make him a suitable mate. The poor girl knew only that she loved the boy and was not in the least dazzled by her parent's gorgeous pictures of the brilliant future in store for a millionaire's daughter.

"If I can't have around me the people I like best," she protested, over and over, "I don't see the pleasure of being rich. Oh, papa, dear papa, don't make me treat him uncivilly, at least! When he rings the bell let me invite him into the parlor and break it to him gently. If we must part it should be as friends."

To all of her entreaties he remained firm, but about nine o'clock he went out, saying he had a business errand that needed his attention, and that he relied upon her not to disobey his commands. Whether she would have done so or not we cannot say, as ten o'clock came

and then eleven, but of course no ring announced the one she expected.

Mr. Hall went from the presence of Mr. Felton with a sore heart, but with a clear conscience. If a girl would insist on having a father like that she must suffer the consequences. When he reached the place where he boarded he felt ill and decided not to take his train. He needed a good rest before starting on a long journey.

The first thing he thought of in the morning was not his lost sweetheart, but his doubtful inheritance. He surprised Mr. Keith, who thought him already gone, by appearing at his office and saying he wanted to look at the securities in Mr. Morse's safe, as it would probably be the last time. They went over together and Mr. Brown, the clerk, handed them the packet, Mr. Morse having gone out on some errand. Mr. Hall could not doubt the evidence of his eyes, but he expressed to his friend the same lack of confidence in the trustee as before.

"I've a good mind to grab the thing and run," he said, with a faint laugh. "What could they do to me if I did? It's mine, isn't it?"

"Not at all. You'd be just as much guilty of larceny as any other thief. Yes, that's good law, though it may seem poor logic."

"Good-by, then," said Victor, kissing the brown paper with a tragic air. "I know I never shall set eyes on you again!"

The next day he left town on the noon train, and at

dinner Mr. Felton told his still inconsolable daughter the news she would have to hear some time.

"I've learned why young Mr. Hall didn't keep his appointment last night. He's given up his room and left for good. Yes, bag and baggage."

A scream that pierced him like a knife and a heavy fall on the dining room floor followed the statement. And a few minutes later a doctor's carriage was driven rapidly up the street and paused before the millionaire's residence.

CHAPTER IV.

TRAMPING IN CALIFORNIA.

THE hot sun of a midday in January shone over the ranch. According to a custom brought to Southern California by its early Spanish possessors, and tenacious of life even among the settlers from Eastern America, the inhabitants were taking their rest after the noontime meal. Lack of rain, that curse of the country that often discourages the farmer, showed in the stunted verdure and dry soil on every side. There was a small orange grove, panting for the needed moisture, a few acres of alfalfa and an arid area that was expected to develop later into a barley field, besides a spot that would be used for a kitchen garden if any sign of a possible harvest should appear in the meantime. The ranch-house was a low, inexpensive structure, with most of the rooms on the ground floor, and a woeful lack of paint on its wooden walls. A small stable sheltered a pair of farm-horses, two cows and a few head of miscellaneous stock. In the distance clouds of dust could be seen sweeping like a storm across the horizon, while overhead other clouds floated tantalizingly, but gave no indication of pouring their needed waters on the parched earth.

Darius Gardner, who was the nominal head of the

establishment, smoked his pipe on the narrow porch, looking as if his interest in this world had long since been reduced to that narrow compass. Mrs. Gardner, an invalid for many years, lay on her bed inside the house. Their daughter Elsie, fifteen years of age, was resting in a rocker outside with her father, occupied to the verge of absorption in the latest copy of Munsey's Magazine. And her younger brother, Jacob, sat on the floor near by, whittling aimlessly at a piece of wood.

The family had moved to this spot some years before, on the advice of physicians, who imagined the dryness might cure the ailments of the wife and mother. But though the climate was usually dry enough, the sick woman never recovered sufficiently to leave her room for any length of time. Like many others she had "come too late." The climate of Southern California will do wonders, but there is a limit to its healing powers. Probably it did prolong the flickering spark, but it could not replenish the wasted oil in the lamp.

Unfortunately for her and her children Mr. Gardner had no genius for ranching, nor indeed for any other useful occupation. His favorite position was the one in which we have found him, among those at present available. If he had been asked to name the one he preferred it would probably have been with his elbows resting on a bar and a glass of some alcoholic beverage glued to his lips. He was thinking, as he sat on his porch—or rather on his wife's, for the ranch was her property, the remains of a small patrimony she had inherited—that this was a very hard world and that

he was, all things considered, the worst used man in it.

Elsie lent about all the attraction there was to the picture, on the exterior of the dwelling. In her print gown and white collar, with a bit of red ribbon in her brown curls, her dress half way between her knees and ankles, she looked very engaging as she leaned over the magazine and drank in the story. She had bright, dark eyes, fringed with most attractive long lashes, and a beautifully rounded little figure, that gave no indication of future undue fatness.

The "hired girl" was, as is usual in this section, a Chinaman, who, not being included in the list of those who followed the Spanish custom, could be heard in his kitchen, rattling his dishes. He bore the name of Ah Wing, and served as family butler, cook, scullery maid and footman. The purse of the Gardner family had been steadily failing for some years and one servant was all they could afford. Elsie did her share of the household duties, acting as nurse to her mother among other things. The small brother was voted too young to be of assistance; and the father, beyond attending to the barn affairs, was not expected to help in any way. When the seasons had been better a Mexican had helped with the crops, from which the scanty income of the family was more or less augmented. The prospect at present was so poor that it was thought wise to save the monthly wage and board of this man.

"There's somebody down to the road, pa," said little Jacob, looking up from his whittling. "He looks as if he was a-comin' up here."

"A tramp, I guess," commented Mr. Gardner, after a cursory and surreptitious inspection of the man, who had stopped at the gate, some two hundred feet from where he sat. "Now, Elsie, don't you give him nothin' to eat. The more you do of that sort of thing the more you may. They mark some secret sign on the fences an' trees so's every tramp what comes along arterwards knows who to impose on."

Elsie did not hear him at first. She was too deeply absorbed in her book to think of anything else. It was only when Jacob nudged her foot that she came back to earth and had her attention directed to the stranger.

"Don't pay no 'tention to him, an' p'raps he'll go along," suggested Mr. Gardner, in a whisper. "It makes me tired to see them strong, healthy fellers trampin' up an' down the country, gittin' their livin' out of honest, hard-workin' people."

"He may not be a tramp at all," said Elsie, putting down her *Munsey*. "And if he is, you know mother won't let us send any one away hungry. Run down to the gate, Jakey, and see what he wants."

As there was no one on whom the small boy could shift his new "white man's burden" he rose unwillingly, and shuffled, still whittling, toward the man who had caused this commotion. He wished with all his heart that he had not disturbed the others by calling their attention to the apparition, and been left to sit in peace in the shade.

If the reader will look carefully through the dusty coating that envelopes the features and soils the cloth-

ing of the traveler, he will discover no less a person than our friend Victor Hall, who had, for reasons satisfactory to himself, undertaken a long walk through this out-of-the-way locality. As Master Jacob approached, he addressed him pleasantly with, "Hallo, my little man, what's *your* name?"

"Never you mind what my name is," was the ungracious retort. "The folks wanter know what yer hangin' 'round here fer."

"Indeed! Well, I only stopped to inquire if this is John Smith's house."

"No, 'tain't. It's Mrs. Gardner's house, an' she lives here, an' Darius Gardner, an' Elsie Gardner, an' me. Now you've found out, s'pose you march along."

Mr. Hall glanced at his dirt-covered clothing and admitted to himself that he did not present a very impressive appearance. But he smiled back at the boy, for the little fellow's surly manner only amused him.

"The fact is, my lad, I've walked all the morning and would like something to eat, if it's not too much trouble. So I'll thank you to say as much to Mrs. Gardner, or Mr. Darius Gardner, or Miss Elsie Gardner; that is, unless you feel authorized to attend to the matter yourself."

The boy stared at the young man with a not very hospitable expression.

"Yer'd git mity little from Darius Gardner, I'll tell yer that. He don't take no stock in you kind of people. Mrs. Gardner's sick abed and can't be asked no how. I'll tell Elsie Gardner an' see what *she* says."

The amused smile that illumined the traveller's face broadened into a grin.

"I do believe he takes me for a tramp," he said to himself, as the boy slouched off. "I don't know as I blame him, either, for I'm so covered with dust that my best friend wouldn't know me. It's a good joke, any way, and I may as well play it out. I wonder what sort of young lady Miss Elsie will turn out to be?"

When Jacob returned from his errand Mr. Gardner renewed his protests against giving food to "one of them lazy good-for-nothin's." To which Miss Elsie replied, without debating the matter, that her mother's directions were explicit and must be followed. So telling her brother, much to his annoyance, to bid the man go to the kitchen, where Ah Wing would give him some bread and butter and tea, she resumed the story she was reading when first disturbed by the incident.

Mr. Hall laughed good-naturedly when the message was delivered, and putting one hand on the board fence, vaulted over it without stopping to open the gate. Then he followed the lad to the kitchen, where his reception by the Chinese cook was no more cordial than the one that preceded it. When the plate and cup were handed to him, Victor stepped out of doors with them, preferring the clear air of the yard. The wily Celestial, in some fear that the "tramp" intended to steal the china, watched him furtively from a window, prepared to give the alarm in case he started off on a run.

The traveller gave ample evidence of the state of

his appetite by devouring the food and drinking the tea in a very short space of time. Then, after returning the china to the Chinaman, which was certainly appropriate, he sat down on a bench near by and relapsed into deep thought.

An hour later Mr. Gardner, happening to pass the spot, saw to his astonishment that the "tramp" was still there; and, it not being one of his wife's rules that "people of that sort" should be harbored after their hunger was satisfied, he made bold to say, "If there's nothin' else you want, young feller, you'd better be goin'."

Mr. Hall, who had in the meantime washed his face and hands of some part of the dust that had clung to them, arose and addressed Mr. Gardner respectfully.

"I would like to speak to Miss Elsie before I leave," he said.

"W-h-a-t!" gasped the astounded man.

"Yes, if you please. I would like to thank her for her hospitality."

Mr. Gardner gasped again.

"Say, you git out of here!" He pointed toward the road.

His voice was raised to such an angry pitch that the Chinaman inside began to tremble among his pots and pans. He had heard that tramps were dangerous persons, and perhaps this one intended to murder everybody on the premises, including himself. Elsie and her brother were also disturbed by the noise and came around the corner to ascertain its reason.

"What is it, father?" asked the girl, in a tone of quiet assurance.

The "tramp's" hat was removed from his head as the pretty vision appeared. He bowed low, and when he found that Mr. Gardner's indignation was too great for utterance, addressed the young girl politely.

"Am I speaking to Miss Elsie?" he asked.

"Yes," she said.

"Then permit me to thank you for the refreshments so kindly given me."

Mr. Gardner started to speak, but was interrupted with a wave of the hand on his daughter's part that reduced him to silence.

"You are very welcome—sir," she said, hesitating an instant before using the final word.

"Can you tell me how far it is to Olluma?"

"Much farther than you can walk to-night, I am afraid," was the kind reply. Elsie was evidently impressed with the unusual bearing of her strange visitor. "You are welcome to remain with us till morning if you desire," she added, slowly.

"Elsie, are you crazy!" cried the father.

"If it will not incommode you I shall accept your kindness," said Mr. Hall. Then he added, smiling, "I do not wish to cause any difference of opinion in the family."

Before Elsie could reply again Mr. Gardner drew her aside and expostulated earnestly. She paid little attention to him until he uttered the words, "your mother," upon which she said she would leave it to the invalid and abide by her decision.

"Will you step into the house a moment, sir, till I can consult my mother?" she said.

CHAPTER V.

“YOU’LL BE LIKE MARIAN.”

REMARKING that, with the young lady’s permission, he would remain outside, Mr. Hall strolled up and down the lawn, waiting for the verdict. Mr. Gardner followed his daughter to her mother’s room to give his version of the question at issue, and little Jacob sidled in after them. The sick woman was prompt in rendering her decision. With a spare bed in the house and a tired man outside, she had no hesitation in telling Elsie to bid him welcome.

“I don’t seem to amount to much in this family,” was Mr. Gardner’s disheartened remark, as the decision turned against him.

“You know why I do this.” said the wife, wearily. “You know very well.”

“Now, don’t always be throwin’ that up at me,” was her husband’s snarling reply. “You’ll make a nice lodgin’ house for tramps here, jest on account of that boy.”

“He may be asking for a bed himself some day,” responded the invalid, wiping her eyes.

As a result of the interview with her mother, Elsie showed the traveller to his room. In response to his offer to help her about the ranch, she said she would

think the matter over and see what she could find for him. He was not a farmer, nor used to manual labor of any sort, as one glance at his hands proved. The bed he would occupy would cost nothing and his food was too little to think about. She was glad the opportunity had come to her, and like Mrs. Gardner, thought of the especial reason why she ought not to turn him away.

Left in his chamber alone, Mr. Hall took from his pocket an envelope that had been through the mail and opened two letters. Both bore signs of having been handled more than once, but he read them again with keen interest:

My Dear Mr. Keith [one of them began]: A most distressing occurrence compels me to send you these lines. The matter concerns Mr. Victor Hall, but as I do not know his address and think perhaps you may, I communicate with you instead. You remember the securities I showed you, embracing the trust funds I held for him. They were done up in a brown paper parcel, you will recollect, and tied with blue ribbon.

This morning as some of the dividends were coming due, I took out the parcel and opened it. Imagine my surprise at finding within nothing but a lot of folded white blank paper! Diligent search and inquiries of my assistants have failed to afford any solution of this appalling mystery. Can you offer a suggestion or hazard a guess as to what has happened. The worst of the matter is that the bonds are unregistered and consequently negotiable. I think Mr. Hall should know of the matter at once and beg you to communicate with him. If nothing

transpires within a few days I shall render an account of the loss to the court.

Very Truly,

RICHARD A. MORSE.

Mr. Hall read this letter through five or six times, pausing long between the readings. Then he took up the other letter, which was signed by Cyrus Keith, and read that with equal slowness and intensity:

I have no opinion to offer in this unpleasant business [said the lawyer's note], but I must caution you not to lose your head. The bonds were in the package all right when last we saw it. Who has meddled with it and substituted a false parcel I do not know; and neither, as a matter of fact, do you. If I were to suggest anything it would be to put the affair quietly in the hands of an experienced detective. His wisest course, I think, would be to move very slowly, but that would be a matter for his own judgment. If you decide to return I shall be glad to see you, but there is nothing you can do. I am ready to act in your stead in any reasonable and legal way you may direct.

It was no wonder that the perusal of these two letters brought beads of perspiration to Mr. Hall's face. He had received them several days before and could not yet make up his mind what answer to send. The fact that he was not permanently located would account in Mr. Keith's mind for his delay and it was an occasion when common sense was needed in an unusual degree.

An unexpected knock on the door disturbed him at last and caused him to start to his feet. For a second

he could not recollect where he was. When it all came back to him he hastened to open to Master Jacob.

"Else wants ter know if yer kin milk," said he. "Pa's the only one 'round the place that kin, an' he's so upshot with your being let inter the house he won't stir off the sofy."

It happened that Victor did know something about milking, having taken a fancy to learn that art some years before, while spending a summer in the country. Laughing at Jacob's manner of referring to his father, he went below, took up the pail that was handed him and proceeded to the cowyard, where he was soon extracting the lacteal fluid from the udder of one of the bovines there. He had about half-filled the pail when he saw Miss Elsie approaching, and paused to greet her with a pleasant "good-evening," as she stood a little away from him and watched the process.

"You haven't always been a tramp, have you?" asked the girl, as he resumed his task.

"Why, don't I look like an experienced hand at the business?"

She shook her head decidedly.

"I thought I was doing it very well."

"But you *haven't* always—have you, now?" she persisted.

"Tramped? Well, no. I used to crawl, I believe."

"Crawl?" she repeated.

"Yes, crawl, as the English say, more correctly than 'creep,' it seems to me. Moved along on all fours, you know. Tramping implies a swinging use of the limbs. Babies crawl, grown people tramp."

"But that isn't what I mean. We call a tramp a man who—" She hesitated.

"Who goes about from place to place, with no visible means of support?"

Elsie nodded, relieved.

"No, I haven't always done that, even since I was a man grown. And to tell the truth, I don't want to continue it any longer than I can help. Everybody doesn't treat us as well as you."

She waited a little while, to get the next question right. She did not wish to hurt his feelings.

"Would you work, if you found anything to do?" she asked, finally.

"If it was anything I was fitted for. I'm afraid there are not many things included in that category."

"That cat—"

"Category; list, you know. Most of the men who tramp do so, I imagine, because they have no calling or profession."

She watched the swift filling of the milkpail and eyed the milker interestedly.

"Would you like to work on a ranch, for people who couldn't afford to pay much wages?" she asked, with an effort.

He smiled up at her in a way that won her young heart.

"For you, do you mean? I should like it above all things. But I have a partial promise of something more remunerative at Olluma, if I can get there, and I fear your suggestion is influenced by your kind disposition."

The particular animal he was working on had now exhausted her supply of milk and he moved over to the next one, carrying his pail and stool. Elsie followed him.

"We need somebody on this place," she said, when he was again at work. "Pa is not very well, and there's hardly enough to do to hire a Mexican. If you don't succeed where you're going we could give you your board and perhaps something else for awhile. You can think it over."

He could not laugh at the proposition, made with such seriousness. She was a pretty girl and he was in the full bloom of youth.

"I *will* think it over," he responded, gravely.

There was silence for several minutes after that, and he completed his work in the meantime. She walked by his side to the house and called Ah Wing to take the pail from him. Then she asked him if he was tired.

"Not a bit," he said. "What else shall I do? I can chop some wood, if you wish."

No, there was wood enough ready. She wanted to talk with him, and they strolled down to a spreading liveoak, beneath which a rough bench was standing.

"What do you expect to do at Olluma?" she asked, when he was seated by her side.

"Write in an office."

"Then you have had an education. But I could tell that from listening to you."

"I have been to school," he said. "Is that such a remarkable thing, in this part of the country?"

She started to say that it was certainly remarkable in a tramp, but paused in time.

"I've never been inside a schoolhouse in my life," she remarked, instead. "My mother has taught me some, but since she has been confined to her bed I haven't made much progress. If you should come here you could teach me a great deal, I'm sure."

"I would do all I could. And there is the little brother—has he never been at school, either?"

"No. All he knows I taught him, myself. He can read and figure, but he uses such awful language! There's no school near to send him to. I wish there was," she continued, regretfully. "A boy needs to know much more than a girl."

"That's not the modern idea. They are giving girls the best education they can, now-a-days, in the East."

This led her to ask him if he came from the East, and when he mentioned Illinois, she said, with a long breath, that it was a long way off. "You must have found it tiresome, walking so far," she added, simply.

The sun had gone down and the short twilight had begun to give way to the early starlight. A voice came from the direction of the dwelling—it was Jacob's—"Else, ain't yer comin' in for supper? We're waitin'."

"What time is it?" she asked Victor. Then, when he drew out a watch, she exclaimed: "Why, that's gold!"

She had inquired for the time, wondering if anything that would enable him to tell hung at the end of the chain she noticed on his vest. The sight of so much luxury startled her greatly, and a half-formed

suspicion came that her father was right in cautioning her not to admit the stranger to their home.

"It is nearly seven," he answered. "Yes, the watch is gold, I believe. I have had it a long time, and I don't like to part with it now. The truth is," he continued, as they walked toward the house, "I had some property once that was left for me in charge of a trustee; and one day I got word that it had disappeared—been stolen, in fact. So there was nothing left but to look for work and—that's the way I became a tramp. I didn't mean to tell you, but it's out now. Please don't say anything about it to the others. They might think I was complaining."

Darius Gardner sat on the porch and eyed the pair with strong disfavor as they approached. Victor understood that he was the cause of the sharp looks, but thought the better way was not to notice. When Elsie told him where to find water, soap and a towel without going upstairs and also that his place was ready at the table when he had finished, he made his ablutions and went into the dining room. Mr. Gardner, on being called, said he was not coming—that he didn't care for anything—and as Jacob had eaten hurriedly and Mrs. Gardner was unable to leave her bed, Mr. Hall and Elsie were again alone.

"Do you know," said the girl, between mouthfuls, "I almost hope you won't get that place at Olluma." She had banished her suspicions of him almost as soon as they came. "It's lonesome here and you would be a great deal of company."

He was flattered by her evident interest.

"If I don't get the place I shall accept your offer," he replied. "Though I'm afraid your father wouldn't make me very welcome. He doesn't like me, I can see that."

"It's only because he doesn't know you." She spoke as if she had been acquainted with him for an indefinite period. "Mother will like you, because you have the ways of a gentleman, and she was used to such society before we moved here. Jakey will like you when he learns that you can teach him things—and I—I shall make it pleasant as I can. I'm awful sorry you lost your property. Isn't there any chance of your ever getting it back? I should think you could sue the man who had charge of it. He had no right to be so careless."

Something seemed to tell her that the subject was a painful one and she dropped it after that. He began to ask about the products of the ranch, and she told him all she knew of the orange industry and the prices of other products of the region. It was the story familiar enough to most residents of southern California, but very new to him then, of a dry season and a scarcity of water even in the irrigating reservoirs. There would not be half a crop of anything unless the rains came very soon.

"You speak as if you were the man of the house," he could not help saying, when he had listened to her for a long time.

"It amounts to that. With Ma sick abed and Pa as you see him, I have everything on my shoulders."

"And they are not very strong shoulders, either," he commented, with a kindly smile.

"Pretty strong," she answered, with a little flush. "I can carry things in some way, I guess, till Jakey gets old enough to relieve me. We've no mortgage, that's one comfort, and Ma has a little money left. It don't cost us much to live, you see. If it would only rain!"

In this vein they conversed and the time flew rapidly away. The voice of Mr. Gardner finally broke in upon them from the hallway.

"Elsie, did you know it was after nine? It's time the house was quiet."

With just a suspicion of a frown on her face, the young girl asked her visitor to verify the statement, which he pronounced correct, rising at the same time and making it easier for her by saying that he was tired and would be glad to seek repose. They parted at the foot of the stairs, and he went to the plainly furnished little room which had been assigned him. Across the bed lay a white cotton nightshirt that Elsie's thoughtfulness had provided. It was a bit of kindness which, though small in itself, pleased him greatly.

He had just settled himself to sleep, when the sound of low voices reached him from the porch.

"If you have any regard for yourself you wouldn't make so free with every tramp that happens along the road."

"'Sh, Pa! He might hear you. I haven't made free with him. He's not an ordinary tramp, either.

He told me he had been to school, and he carries a gold watch. Some property that he used to have—”

Elsie stopped short, remembering her promise not to reveal what had been told her and her father's voice was heard again.

“They all talk the same way. You're a headstrong girl and delight in going contr'y to what I tell you. You'll be just like Marian if you keep on.”

Victor did not mean to listen, but unless he stuffed something into his ears he could not help hearing. The night was so perfectly still that every sound was clear and distinct.

“I'm not going to stay and hear you abuse Marian,” said the girl, in a voice that contained a half sob. “You drove her away, as you are trying to drive me. This gentleman is going in the morning, and probably I'll never set eyes on him again.”

“Gentleman! A tramp, from no one knows where! Well, keep on! Have your own way. We'll see the end of it some time.”

A door closed, small feet were heard ascending the stairs, and a stifled sound as of suppressed tears was wafted through the thin partition.

Victor went to sleep at last, but two questions haunted his dreams:

Who was Marian and what had Marian done?

CHAPTER VI.

JAKEY AND THE "CIRKIS."

THE sun was high in the heavens when Victor awoke, and he sprang from his bed with a guilty feeling that he had been neglecting a duty. As long as he stayed on the ranch he should attend to the milking at least, to carry out the character he had assumed. When he descended he saw Mr. Gardner coming from the stable with the full pails in his hands and anything but a pleasant expression on his face. Not wishing to meet him in these circumstances, Victor walked in the other direction and found a more agreeable countenance turned toward his in bright expectation. Elsie, to put him at ease, spoke first.

"I knew you were tired from your—your walk, and there was no need of waking you. But isn't it a lovely morning! I should think those fleecy clouds meant to give us a shower if I hadn't been disappointed so often. What is the exact time?"

He drew out the watch, and on opening it burst into a laugh.

"It's only half-past four! Not so very late, after all. I must have forgotten to wind it. I'm afraid I wouldn't be a very valuable assistant on a ranch, I forget so many things. I'm sorry, though, that your

father had to do the milking. And he not well," he added, after a pause.

A strange look which he did not know how to interpret crossed the bright face of the girl.

"I ought to have learned, myself, long ago," she said. "There'll be trouble some day, if he really does get too sick to do it, and no one to take his place. Perhaps," she smiled up into his face, "perhaps you would teach me?"

"You don't seem just made for a ranch girl."

Her eyes glistened.

"You mean—I seem good for something better?"

"Something very much better. And I don't think independent positions the best things for women. I think the right destiny for you is to become the wife of a good man—not a ranch owner, either; somebody who lives in a town, let us say."

She shook her head, as if refusing an offer that had actually been presented in due form.

"I've thought all about marriage. Ma's experience is always before me. It's not been a success in her case, at least. You know what an invalid she is, never able to leave her room, just waiting for the end as patiently as she can. Well, it was my little brother who did that, to begin with. And when she seemed recovering somewhat and we had hopes—there was—oh, no! I shall never marry. I've seen too much of it."

"Ain't you goin' to have no breakfast to-day?" came her father's harsh voice from the house door. "Folks what's bin up an' workin' are hungry, whether them what's done nothin' is, or not."

The young people moved at once toward the sound. Elsie whispered that her guest, for so she had come to consider him, must not mind her father's ways, and that she hoped he would be drawn into no controversy at the table. This turned out to be an easy injunction to obey, as Mr. Gardner ate the meal in silence, stuffing the food into his mouth, with the evident intention of carrying out the old proverb to "let his victuals stop" it. There were boiled eggs, coffee, some chicken warmed over, hot muffins and fruit. A farmer may not have much money in his pocket, but his family usually can get enough to eat.

Mr. Gardner left the table before the others, and young Jacob, who had been as taciturn as his father, speedily followed him out of the room.

"I think I'd best start on my walk to Olluma," said Mr. Hall. "Indeed, I meant to go still earlier, when I retired last night. With the rest that I need at noon, in the heat of the day, I shall hardly arrive before sunset. Let me thank you heartily for the kindness you have shown to a perfect stranger, and to express the hope that you will permit me, some day when I have bettered my circumstances, to return and make you a call."

"I shall be very glad to have you. I wish you could stay longer now."

"I'm afraid it won't do. I ought to reach Olluma to-night. If all goes well there I shall be at the end of my tramping for the present."

"It's awfully lonely here," said the girl, in a low tone. "It's a real kindness to have some one come."

I don't want you to think of it in any other way. You were so good, too, to help with the milking. Well," she added, choking down her disappointment, "if you must go, you must."

She left him abruptly, afraid that he would see a tear that lurked in a corner of her eye, and which she was trying in vain to restrain. Victor went to his room again, washed his hands, brushed his hair and, muttering to himself that he would be glad when he got once more into touch with his baggage, descended.

Ah Wing came to the kitchen door with a little paper parcel, tied with a piece of blue tape. Victor stared at it sharply and uttered an audible exclamation. It looked for all the world like the package of securities that had been taken from Mr. Morse's safe—or at least that Mr. Keith and he had seen there.

"Miss Else puttee up lunchee," said Ah Wing. "She tellee me say good-by. She gone up stair and no come down now."

His first inclination was to refuse the gift; it made him look more like a beggar than ever, and he did not want to lower himself in her eyes. On second thoughts he accepted it and telling Wing to express his gratitude, went down the path to the high road with it in his coat pocket.

A little way off in the direction he was to travel he saw a small figure which he had no difficulty in recognizing as that of Master Jacob Gardner. The lad was sitting disconsolately by the roadside, and on a nearer approach it was seen that his face was grimy

with turrows that only a combination of tears and fist pokes could give.

"Why, Jacob," asked Victor, "what is the matter?"

It was some time before anything like an intelligible answer could be obtained, though many sounds that seemed intended as a reply to the question came from the small mouth. At last Mr. Hall thought he distinguished the word "Cirkis."

"Circus?" he repeated. "What about the circus, Jacob?"

The little fellow took his fists from his face and jerked one of them toward the side of the barn nearest to them. Following the direction, Victor saw that gaudy posters emblazoned with representations common to circus troupes covered a large area.

"Where's the circus going to be?" he asked, gradually coming to the point he wanted.

"Brayt'n."

"Is it to-day?"

"'Morrer."

"Well, you're going, I suppose?"

Out of the torrent which followed this suggestion Victor gathered, little by little, that Jakey had set his heart on seeing the show, and that now, when it was right at hand, his sister had told him that she could not let him have the money.

It was Elsie again at the head of affairs. She was both the man and the woman of the little household, evidently.

"Elsie doesn't object to circuses, does she?" asked

Victor. "It's just because she don't think she can afford it?"

"That's all. Last year an' the year afore we went tergether. An' this year it don't rain an' we don't have nothin'."

"Well, Jacob, I think I see a way out of this. How much will it cost to see the show?"

"Two bits, fer a kid like me; four bits fer grown folks." The boy was brightening wonderfully, and his face began to glow with expectation.

"Two bits, four bits?" repeated the young man, slowly. He had not yet become accustomed to this method of reckoning money. "That must be a quarter of a dollar, and fifty cents. Jacob, do you think you could keep a secret?"

"Yasser."

"Then take this" (handing him a small piece of gold) "and scamper over to Brayton tomorrow morning as early as you can. Get two tickets for your father and Elsie, and one for yourself, for the afternoon. Ask for reserved seats; they'll cost a little more, but never mind. When you show them to your sister just say a man gave them to you. Don't tell her it was I. If you can't promise I won't let you have the money at all."

Jacob readily promised and took the gold piece in his hand, as if he was afraid it would be taken from him. The value of the coin was two dollars and a half.

"Yer ain't no tramp!" was the boy's comment, as

he stepped back and eyed the traveller suspiciously. "What are yer, a robber?"

The thought did not seem to lower the stranger as much as might be expected in the small brain. Indeed, to Master Jacob a robber was a sort of stage hero, to be regarded in much the same light as a circus rider or a lion tamer.

"We've got one secret together, Jakey," said Mr. Hall, "and we may as well have another. So I'll tell you—just between ourselves, mind—I'm *not* a robber. I'll even tell you a third one, but you mustn't breathe it for the world; I think your sister Elsie one of the prettiest and nicest girls I ever saw."

Too late he saw the angry flame kindling in the eyes of the dirty-faced lad. With every appearance of uncontrollable anger, Jacob, his face convulsed and his fists clenched, threw the gold coin in the dust at Victor's feet.

"*Damn yer!*" That was only the beginning. The curses flew from the little mouth. "If I was big enough I'd lick yer so yer couldn't stand. I'd *kill* yer!" The boy backed away and sought a sizable stone, failing which, he picked up a hard lump of earth and threw it with such accuracy of aim that only a quick jump saved Victor from receiving it full in the face. Then, fearing punishment, Jacob ran as fast as his diminutive legs could carry him in the direction of home.

Much disturbed and at first not realizing how he had managed to give so much offence, Mr. Hall debated whether it was best to return to the Gardner house and

make his explanations and apologies to Miss Elsie. After reflection he decided that this might only make matters worse, and turned regretfully toward his destination.

He walked rapidly, for a torrent had begun to seethe in his bosom, swollen from many little streams beside the one that had just joined it. The way was dusty, the sun came out hot and strong, but he had youth and health and felt no weariness. The god of day was in the zenith when he came to a small apology for a hotel and concluded to stop there for lunch. But before he had ordered the meal he remembered the package in his pocket and seeking a quiet corner removed its wrappings.

There were sandwiches, and cake, and fruit, just the kind of lunch he might have expected. His face softened as he looked at the articles and thought of the little fingers that had prepared them for him. There was a napkin, too—a real cloth napkin—and some pepper and salt mixed, in a piece of brown paper. And there was something else, an envelope with a note inside!

“I hope you won’t think me bold in writing this,” said the note, “but I know few people outside of my own little world, and I think you may be able to aid me, with no loss to yourself. I knew long before you came that life on the ranch was not the existence for me—that I must seek another when I could do so without neglecting those who depend on me. My escape will not be by the gate of matrimony, which so

often leads to a harder lot than the one forsaken. All I ask, when my family can spare me, is to live and work somewhere among people instead of on a back road where not even one wagon passes sometimes in a day. I want to get a little education too—not a grand one, just enough so I won't be ashamed when I meet ordinary folks. If you will kindly write me, when you get settled and have time, sending your address so I may know how to reach you—that is all I have to ask. Again I say, please don't think me forward. I am like a girl on an island, which ships only pass once in a long time, and I have to wave my handkerchief to the first one I see. Of course, as I told you, if you can come out here any time, you will be very, very welcome."

Victor Hall sat still for some minutes, and then proceeded to rearrange the parcel exactly as he had found it. He tied it up with the ribbon, everything inside, even to the letter—for that he knew by heart—and put the package back in his pocket. Presently he went to order a meal prepared and after eating it and taking another rest, resumed his walk.

The sun was setting as he entered the town of Oluma and inquired his way to the hotel. As he gave his name the clerk said, "There's some baggage here for you, Mr. Hall. Shall I send it to your room?"

Thankful for a chance to change his apparel, Victor responded in the affirmative. After a bath and an entire alteration of garment he came down to supper. As it was not quite ready he procured some stationery and wrote the following brief note to Miss Gardner:

Dear Miss Elsie:—A thousand thanks for your thoughtful parcel and communication. My address is simply, "V. Hall, Olluma," and anything sent to me here will be received and answered.

I had the misfortune to say something which wounded the feelings of your small brother—just as I was leaving this morning—to my intense regret. Lest he should have injured me in your esteem by giving an unfair version I must assure you he had no cause for anger. However, I shall not hold any feeling against the little chap. I was only sorry that such a pleasant visit as I made at your house should be marred in any way at its close.

Your request is granted in advance. I shall be delighted to place myself at your service in any way agreeable to you, either now or at a future time.

With great respect, your Obt. Servt.,

V. HALL.

After supper he thought it best not to visit the gentleman who was expecting him before the next day, and being tired and sleepy he was soon in dreamland.

CHAPTER VII.

"IT WAS ELSIE AT THE GATE."

"I HAVE received your letter, my dear Keith, and after some dyspeptic qualms have succeeded in digesting its contents." So wrote Mr. Hall to his friend. "To say that the dose is unpalatable can hardly surprise you. That I had been expecting some such outcome, sooner or later, you know well. If you ask what, in my opinion, had best be done about it, I can only say that I have no faith that the culprit will be detected. He had a chance to lay his plans too deeply. The property is gone. I question if the shrewdest 'sleuthhound' you can put on its track will get so much as a scent of it. (No pun intended.)

"I have secured the sort of position I wanted in the office of a lawyer here, a Mr. Whiteley, and am doing my best to fit myself for an attorney at the California bar. As I have got to make my way in the world, perhaps it is best the confounded inheritance I was never to inherit is off my mind. As, for some time at least, I can hope to earn no income, and as my means are rather straitened, I may have to accept your kind offer and ask a small loan for old acquaintance' sake. I do not want anything now, but when I do I shall

write freely. I calculate that \$1,000 all told will see me to solid ground.

"It is folly to waste good money on Morse. A quiet eye on his movements by a non-professional like yourself may succeed in tracing something, after his first scare is over, but I fear not. No, I shall not think of returning. With my impetuous disposition I might get myself into the lockup, forgetting the 'other cheek' business.

"This is a great country out here. I can make my fortune, as others have done, and you will see me do it, too. I shall think no more than is necessary about the past. My face is toward the morning, which in this case happens, oddly enough, to be in the direction of the setting sun."

A few weeks later an answer came from Mr. Keith: "I am delighted that you are in such good spirits. I feared all sorts of things. I send you a newspaper with the latest phase of the robbery dished up by an ingenious reporter. I might as well confess, however, that my opinion of the matter is very much like your own. I shall keep an eye out for your interests and if I see a place to strike I shall strike hard. In the meantime it may be well to follow your advice and disarm suspicion. I have been questioned about your address, but pretend ignorance. You will notice that the postmark on this letter is from another town."

And several months later still, in another letter, occurred these words: "Our friend Morse is certainly a peculiar chap. He called on me yesterday and left

his check to cover the dividends on the stolen bonds, for the quarter just over, saying he hoped to make the entire amount good one of these days and would keep up the interest in the meantime. He left the money in my hands in your absence, thinking I might in some way hear from you; so you can have it whenever you please and will not be obliged to borrow. From the standpoint of believing that he robbed his own safe—which is still my opinion, notwithstanding what has transpired—I think he is rather cunning in the course he has taken. However, it would be folly to refuse what we can get and I shall continue to take anything he brings and hold it subject to your orders.

“By the way, I meet Miss Fulton frequently and she never fails to inquire if I have had a letter from you. She looks very anxious, and I fancy is growing pale. I hope you did not leave her with any false expectations. A man must be above board in his dealings with women.”

These letters disturbed the young law student, but he bit his lips and stuck to his legal library. To offset them he had, not only one, but several letters from a certain young miss near Brayton, with whom he was an established and regular correspondent. Her first communication was in answer to the one he sent her on the night of his arrival, and showed that no breach had occurred in her sentiments on account of his collision with her small brother. Subsequent ones were devoted to doings on the ranch and the writer's aspirations for a life outside its confined area, not omitting hopes for Mr. Hall's success in all things.

The newspaper which, according to Mr. Keith, contained something of interest in relation to the missing securities, never arrived, and after inquiring at the post several times, Mr. Hall dismissed the matter from his mind. He thought if it was anything of especial value Mr. Keith would have dwelt more upon it.

When June arrived, Victor thought of a vacation and the Gardner ranch occurred to him as an eminently proper place at which to spend it. He wrote a letter, half serious, half jocose, to Elsie, inquiring if her folks ever took summer boarders, and saying he would be glad to help out with the milking or any other light work, besides paying a reasonable sum for accommodation. Her answer came as soon as the mails could bring it, declaring that he would be more than welcome and that anything like pecuniary payment was not to be thought of. If he could put up with the frugal table and poor quarters on the ranch they were entirely at his disposal. She added that she had consulted her mother about the matter and that Mrs. Gardner seconded her invitation warmly.

It was evidently not necessary to consult her father or Master Jacob, otherwise the verdict might have been different. But Victor hoped by management to disarm the opposition of both these personages in time.

He hired for little more than an agreement to take good care of it, a fair horse, buggy and harness, and drove over the road on which he had tramped to Olluma in the preceding January. A mile on the hither side of the farmhouse he saw a small figure by the side

of the road, which as he came closer he recognized as Jakey.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Mr. Hall. "I thought it was you. Jump in and ride. I'm going straight to your house."

"Nobody wants yer there," came from between the set lips. "Yer'd better turn your horse 'round and go home."

"Well, that's not very hospitable! You shouldn't keep up your spite at me for something I meant all right. Get in, that's a good boy."

Jacob showed no intention of complying with the request.

"If yer go, it's at yer own risk," he persisted, darkly. "Pa don't like yer, an' he'll let yer find it out, the first thing yer know. They've sot down on him—Ma an' Else have—but he's made up his mind. An' when Pa get's sot, he's orful."

It was not a very cheerful outlook. Mr. Hall began to think perhaps he would best not have come. It would not do to back out now, though. In the distance he could see a tiny speck at the house gate that he felt sure was Elsie, who was probably awaiting him with expectancy.

"I'm much obliged for your advice, Jakey," he said, "but when I'm invited to visit people I must be my own judge about accepting. If you don't care to ride, you needn't; but you may want to take this team alone some time and you'd best keep on the right side of the owner."

So saying he started up his animal and proceeded

at a trot, with the parting salutation of the boy ringing in his ears: "You'll wish y' hadn't! Yer'll wish yer'd gone when yer was told."

Yes, it was Elsie at the gate, and she waved her hand to him as soon as she was quite sure it was he.

"I'm very glad to see you, Mr. Hall," she said, before he could spring from the wagon. "I was afraid something had detained you. Who were you talking with back there in the road?"

When he told her it was Jacob she looked worried and expressed a hope that the boy had not said anything disagreeable.

"What made you think he might?"

He led the horse to the barn, she following.

"Oh, he takes such funny fits! This family, as I think you must have noticed, gets broken into two sections sometimes. Jakey always sides with Pa, but Ma and I make a majority."

"I fear I ought not to stay here unless I can give your father a better opinion of me," he remarked, gravely. "I shall try my best to bring him around, but if I can't possibly—"

"There, there!" she interrupted, "don't begin to threaten, when I've only just got sight of you. I think the best way when folks are unreasonable is to let them sulk it out. The ranch belongs to Ma an' she wants you here."

He smiled at the casuistry and she took hold with a hand more practiced than his to help unharness.

"I have thought of a scheme to win your father over," said Mr. Hall, as they walked toward the house.

"Will you leave the means entirely to me and not complain if I succeed?"

She nodded wonderingly. Supper was ready, but she made him come to her mother's room for a few minutes, where the invalid added her hopes to those of her daughter that he would enjoy his rest and remain as long as he found it agreeable.

Neither Mr. Gardner nor his son came to the table that evening, which disturbed the visitor somewhat. He could hear their low voices on the porch outside and fancied that all sorts of uncomplimentary things were being said about him. Elsie did her best to brighten the meal, keeping him busy in listening to and answering questions. When Victor rose he signed that she should leave him alone for the present, to give him a chance for his proposed interview with her father. Realizing that even a surly dog is better natured when his stomach is full he strolled off into the field to allow Mr. Gardner to partake of his meal undisturbed.

It was nearly nine when Elsie, who was waiting anxiously for him, saw her visitor approaching the house and her father walking peaceably by his side. She had been distressed by their long absence together in the direction of the orange grove, for she feared the outcome.

"Then I can stay with your full consent?" she overheard Mr. Hall inquire, as her father left him to enter the doorway.

"Yes. But it is with your solemn promise—"

The voice fell and she could not guess the concluding words.

"You've made it all right with him!" she cried, when she and Victor were again alone.

"Yes, Elsie. And you're not to ask questions. I can stay without danger of a quarrel with your respected sire, and that, I trust, will be accepted by your guardian angel brother for himself as well."

"I'm so glad! I was afraid he would induce you to leave us, and I simply couldn't have endured it. I've been so lonely! And I've looked forward to this for so long!"

"I suppose we ought to be going in," he said, glancing at his timepiece.

"No, indeed! It was only because Pa wanted to be hateful that he said those things the other time you were here. I'm often up till ten and it's not nine yet. Let us sit down on the bench under that tree. I want to tell you how I first found out you were not a tramp. You remember the gold piece you offered Jakey?"

He tried to pretend ignorance, but she proceeded:

"He threw it on the ground because you said something he didn't fancy. He tried to tell me what you said, but I wouldn't let him; I knew it wasn't anything that need make him act like that. Well, it seems that after getting over the worst of his temper he went back and picked up that money. He took it in a piece of paper to the arroyo to wash the pollution of your touch from it, and then went over to Brayton with some other boys and had an awful time

with lemonade and peanuts at the circus. He went both afternoon and evening; and as we didn't know where he was we had a scare before he turned up. I wondered where he got the money and had all kinds of fears till I forced him in the morning to confess the truth.

“‘And so you took the gentleman's money and spent it after abusing him as you did!’ I said. ‘It wasn't *his* money then,’ he retorted; ‘It was anybody's, when I found it on the ground, and I had a right to do as I liked with it.’ *Such* an argument! Now, tell me, why did you want to make me think you a beggar when you had gold to throw away on saucy boys?’”

“It came about in a queer way. I had no idea your folks would take me for a tramp till they had done so, and then the joke was funny enough to keep up. I asked if I could get some food, as no hotel came in sight and I was hungry. I expected of course to pay for it. When you all decided I was a tramp I was amused and didn't think it worth explaining.”

“What were you walking for?”

“Simply because I had overslept in the morning and the stage had gone off without me. I took this road because I was told it was pleasanter and more hilly, just to get the view. And I got one,” he added, “that I wouldn't have missed for a great deal.”

Elsie understood and reddened. She was not used to compliments and they tasted sweet to her. Then they talked of various things till he felt it wise to look

at his watch again. It was past ten now and he suggested—not she—that they should retire.

When Elsie had locked the door she heard a light step on the porch and went back to open it. It was Jacob, whom she supposed in bed long before. He slid by her and ran up stairs, disdaining to answer the questions she put to him in her astonishment.

CHAPTER VIII.

NEWCOMER TO THE RANCH.

MR. HALL seemed to get along very well with the Gardner family, for some time after this. Elsie liked him, and Mrs. Gardner thought him one of the most agreeable young men she had ever known. Her husband kept his bargain and the reader may as well know the cause. A little arrangement to pay a weekly sum for board and to put the amount into Mr. Gardner's hands without letting the others know anything about it, settled the whole business. Gardner had certain wants, largely in the refreshment line, which he had great difficulty in meeting. The purse of the household was kept, of necessity, by the women folks, and, as he brought nothing to the common fund and the treasury was always low, he had been forced to all sorts of measures to gratify his thirst. Now he was to have seven dollars a week, paid in advance, for a month or more. Visions of unlimited stimulants overcame his paternal instincts, and even his natural disposition to oppose anything his wife fancied.

As Elsie had said, Master Jacob sided with his father in most things, and when he found—though he did not know the cause—that Mr. Gardner looked with a kindlier eye on Mr. Hall, the boy laid a part

at least of his own feelings on the shelf for the present. He did not speak to the guest, but neither did he throw stones or hard pieces of earth. He accepted the situation for the present, reserving all rights, as the advertisements say, to change his course if at a later time it seemed advisable.

Among the things that Victor had brought in his wagon was a gun and a box of cartridges, with which he intended to kill something if possible before his vacation was over. There were in the range of mountains back of the ranch a few deer, and once in a while the tracks of a puma (mountain lion) were seen. After a few days he began to make excursions in the hope to capture one of these animals, the more dangerous preferred. Although he did not succeed in his quest for some time he had the exhilaration of the long tramps and found it a pleasant change from the monotony of ranch life. For, pleasant as his little talks and strolls were with the young daughter of the house, Victor was too active to be able to live by that kind of bread alone.

One evening he found an unanticipated variation to existence in the Gardner home. As he returned from an unproductive hunt he noticed a new figure on the veranda, that of a young woman of about his own age. She was sitting pensively on a low chair, with her hands clasped together about one of her knees, the leg to which it belonged being crossed easily over the other. Victor's quick glance showed that the girl was of good form and of interesting features. He was of the opinion that she would be

an acquisition to the household if, as he hoped, she intended to make more than a temporary stay in it. He walked slower, to keep the vision unaware of his presence as long as possible. When at last the girl noticed his approach she rose as if slightly disturbed and, turning her face from him, entered the house. A moment later Elsie came out and greeted him. It was easy to see that she had been weeping, though she had evidently tried to remove all traces of tears from her eyes.

He looked rather than spoke the natural inquiry.

"Oh, it's Marian," she said, in a low tone.

"Ah!"

"My sister, who has been away for some time."

"I didn't know you had a sister."

"I hardly knew I had, myself," she said, and then seemed sorry for the expression. She wanted to get a little farther from the door, so they would not be overheard. "I don't know how much you care to hear or how much I ought to tell you, but—well, the truth is, she went away some years ago on account of—father."

He noticed her reddening cheeks and in a kindly tone said, "Elsie, don't tell me any more. There is no reason I should hear it. Has she come back to live here—that's all you need to say."

"We haven't got as far as that. She only came an hour ago. Ma is failing fast, you know, and Marian is like one of the eyes in her head."

"It's going to crowd you," he remarked. "I must be occupying her bedroom. I will get a room at

some house in the neighborhood and come here every day, just the same."

"The idea! She can sleep with me, can't she? Don't you think of such a thing. I shall feel badly if you speak of it again. Come in now and let me introduce you. Or if you like I'll fetch her out."

He said it should be as she pleased and she adopted the latter plan, in order not to disturb the invalid, who was passing a very nervous day.

"Mr. Hall, my sister Marian."

Marian had started to extend her hand in welcome, but at the mention of his name she paused abruptly.

"Mr. Hall!" she repeated, as if much startled.

"Victor Hall, at your service," he said, at which she grew more confused than ever.

"Take your seat, Miss Gardner, from which I am afraid I drove you away," he said, realizing, though unable to understand her embarrassment.

Elsie went into the house to see to the dinner and the couple were left alone.

"I have been absent from home for some time," Marian said, trying to compose herself, "and find my mother quite ill. The air of her chamber has made me faint, I think. I hope you will excuse my seeming lack of cordiality. Do you live in the neighborhood, Mr.—Hall?"

"No, at Olluma; but I am passing a short vacation here with your people. I came from Illinois less than a year ago."

Again there were signs of disturbance in the young woman's brain. She mastered her emotions with an

effort, and turned the conversation to matters concerning the weather and the scenery. With much tact he succeeded in making himself agreeable, and by the time they were called to the evening meal they were on easier terms. Marian astonished him by a certain superiority of manners and education to the rest of her family, except possibly the mother. He could hardly connect her in a sisterly capacity with the little wood violet called Elsie or the strange compound called Jacob. Did the time she had spent away from the family account for the great difference? If so, she must have learned rapidly.

"I hope you have come home for a long stay, Miss Marian," he said, when the supper was over and he found himself on the porch alone with her again.

"You—hope—so?" she repeated, vaguely.

"It must be pleasant for you to get back; and I can see that to your sister and mother your return has given much joy."

She did not seem to have any answer ready, and he branched off on the subjects of scenery and weather, and finally to that of himself, relating with many a merry laugh how he made the acquaintance of her family, when they mistook him for a tramp.

"The mistake was quite natural," said he, "for I had lost the stage that morning and was covered with dust. Your little sister got me to milk the cows, and I even offered to work out my lodging on the woodpile. When she saw how industrious I was she proposed to give me employment on the place till I could get something better to do, and that night I occupied

the room I now have. It was a strange beginning to a charming acquaintance, for I had no friends in California at that time. When I got settled at studying law in Olluma I wrote a few letters to Miss Elsie, and when vacation time arrived I secured permission to spend it on this ranch. I am enjoying myself immensely, and the only fly in the ointment is the fact that I shall have to return to my books so soon."

Marian struggled for some moments with a question that rose to her lips and that she tried in vain to down. At last it came out bluntly:

"Are you any relation to a gentleman of your name, who lived in Stromberg?"

"That is where I came from."

"But, it was not you—was it—who had the misfortune—"

His bright face clouded.

"To lose my inheritance? Yes."

"I saw it in the papers," she said, "and when I heard your name it struck me you might be the one."

She was controlling her voice with difficulty, which did not escape his observation.

"Let us talk of something else," he said. "To tell the truth I am doing my best to forget everything in connection with that affair. It altered the course of my life, but I am getting used to the changed conditions. Ah, here is your sister."

Elsie looked from one of them to the other, as if in wonder what they had been talking about. Mr. Hall could not yet decide whether the sisters were

especially fond of each other or not. There seemed a certain constraint between them.

"I ought to go in and stay with mother," said Marian, rising.

"She is asleep," replied Elsie. "If you are going to be with her all night you may as well get the pure air while you can. I haven't had time to ask you yet how long you expect to stay."

With a moment of hesitation, Marian answered that she did not know. She would remain as long as she could do any good. Mr. Hall began to think they might wish to talk unhampered by his presence, and asked them to excuse him while he went for a short stroll. There was a full moon that had already risen and the evening was nearly as light as day.

"I'll go with you, if you want me," Elsie called after him, but he answered that he would only take a few turns up and down the road and return soon. When he was gone the first question that Marian put to her sister was concerning him.

"Don't you think it a little forward, dear, to invite yourself to accompany a man on a moonlight walk?"

"Now, stop!" cried Elsie, deeply wounded. "It sounds too much like things you used to say to me when I was a little girl. You went off and left me to manage things and I'm running them my own way. Just because you've taken a fancy to come back for awhile, don't think you can lord it over those who've stayed at home."

There was not the least bit of anger in the tone, but a quiet determination that counted for much more.

Marian thought the matter sufficiently important to speak upon it a little further.

"Don't be cross, pet. Mr. Hall has been telling me how he made your acquaintance. He seems a pleasant young gentleman, and I think you would like to retain his esteem. Men notice it when girls act too fond of their company. If he had asked you to go, I should not have said a word."

Elsie's anger had already vanished and, drawing her chair nearer to her sister, she slipped one arm around her neck.

"Tell me all you've been doing, Mannie," she said, coaxingly.

"There's not much I can tell, Elsie. You know the trouble between me and father. I took up the side of Paul, and after that he gave me no peace. I am sensitive and couldn't bear the things he said, nor could I reply to him in the same kind of language. I talked it over with mother and she admitted that I might as well go. I knew it was hard for her, but I had great hopes and thought I would be able to earn something to help the rest of you, besides taking off the burden of my support. I know you've thought I was to be envied, but the world is not such a charming place as it looks from a distance. It is hard and cold and sometimes cruel. When I got your letter telling how mother was sinking it was no sacrifice to return. I went away with almost nothing and I've come back with a little to help out her small store."

The stillness of the summer night enveloped the two girls and no sound broke the silence till the younger spoke again.

"You seem so different, Mannie; so much older and wiser—"

"I am older and hope I am wiser, dear."

"And so much better educated. Have you been to school since you went away?"

"Yes, I have been at school. I have learned many things," was the dreamy response.

"If you worked all day you must have got your education at a night school?"

Marian nodded in confirmation. The sisters' cheeks were touched lovingly together.

"I don't want you to go away again," said Elsie. "It was awfully lonesome here, before Mr. Hall came."

"After he went, I think," smiled the other. "After he came and went again, that was when you began to notice the difference, wasn't it?"

Elsie flushed and turned away her face.

"I knew you would think something like that," she said, "but it's not so. I'm not one of your fall-in-love girls. I've seen enough of marriage. He's a real gentleman and I like him, but that's all. And it's all there ever will be."

A dark little form could be seen down by the fence, crouched on the ground, and both the girls noticed it at the same time.

"If you've got any influence with Jakey I wish you'd try to make him use my company decent," Elsie said, as she realized the situation. "He began by throwing things at Mr. Hall, and then by saucing him; and now he spies on every step he takes."

CHAPTER IX.

“YOU JEST LET ELSE ALONE.”

MR. HALL'S vacation came to an unwelcome end, both to him and to the Gardner girls. For Marian had learned to like him and knew she would miss him from the little circle. Her uneasiness in his presence gave way to an entirely opposite feeling. She grew to regard him as a sort of big brother, and he seemed to entirely reciprocate this sentiment.

“There's one thing you might do for me before you go,” said Elsie to her guest a week before the day set for his departure. “You might teach me to load and fire that rifle of yours and leave it till you come again. I don't suppose there's much game running around in Olluma, and you won't need it there.”

“With pleasure,” he answered, “but I must warn you in advance that it is not a weapon to be trifled with. It is apt to kick pretty hard, sometimes, unless you are very careful when you put it to your shoulder.”

The girl laughed merrily.

“It will be no new experience to me. I'm quite used to things that kick—I've had a father and a young brother, you know.” Then she seemed repentant at having said so much and her brow clouded. “Really, Mr. Hall, when you come to think of it, we ought to

have some kind of a weapon here—Marian and I—alone as we are, so far from any settled neighborhood. All the tramps that come along may not be as agreeable as you were, and the sight of a steel barrel has been known to be of value.”

So Victor took the rifle and showed her how it was loaded, and the right way to take aim. He stood by her side when she fired her first shot at a live oak, and though she missed it at fifty feet distance, he said that was by no means remarkable. He got an old newspaper and pinned it to the trunk and made her try again, till at last, to her great pride, she tore a hole in one corner, and began to consider herself a marksman of merit. When she held the gun a little too lightly against her shoulder and uttered a slight cry of pain as the smoke cleared away, he rubbed the sore spot so gently that she was not sorry for the accident. Before the trial was over for the day she had made sufficient improvement to justify his prediction that she would yet become an expert.

He thought it best to suggest to Marian that she take a few lessons in the same line, and took equal pains to show her the points of the weapon. The girl had even better success at the start than her sister, and he declared that she would make a genuine hunter if she kept at it.

“You have decided to remain at home for some time, I understand?” he added, in an interrogative form. Elsie had gone into the house.

“Of course I would not leave mother in her present condition. Even if she is—taken from us, I don’t

see how I would be justified in going at once. When I went before," she seemed to think a defence for that proceeding necessary, and yet did not know how to make it, "there were special reasons. Elsie had mother to direct her, and they got along very well without me. If she is left without her guidance it will be quite another thing. I shall either have to break up the home and take her with me, or stay and make the best of it. Father is so, so—helpless, you know, he could do nothing without her; and my little brother is only a child. I shall have to stay,"

After her life in a more thickly settled community the ranch was evidently not the place she would have chosen; duty was at war with inclination. He formed an enhanced estimate of her character on the spot.

"It is a pity you have no older brother—" he began, and wondered why she started at the words. "I would be glad to fill that position to the best of my ability," he continued, in a bantering, yet half serious tone, "if you lived near Olluma. You have all been so kind that I shall miss you terribly when I go back to my law office."

She asked him, after a pause, how soon he would be admitted to practice and if he intended to stay in Olluma when he was a full-fledged member of the bar. And he told her that he would reach that distinction within a year and that Mr. Whiteley, in whose office he was studying, had already offered him a partnership when that time came, which he thought he should accept. He liked California and believed his future was to be connected with that State.

"What will be your specialty, for I suppose you will have one?" she inquired.

"Oh, I mean to seek a general practice. One can hardly divide it into specialties in a place no thicker settled than Olluma. I shall try to thoroughly book myself on the land and mining laws, for one thing, but if my services are sought by some chap who wants the scales of justice tipped a bit in his favor I shan't refuse my aid—at least, if he has enough money to pay my fee. If any one in this family breaks the laws, though, I promise in advance to defend you gratis," he concluded, with a smile, which she did not seem to appreciate.

"I want you to send me a few books, so that I can teach Elsie," said Marian, as they walked toward the house. "You know what she needs. Send the bill with them and I will remit the money. I don't know any too much myself, but the poor child will grow up in absolute ignorance unless I make an effort. If the crop should be good this year I would like to send her to a boarding school. She is a bright girl, if I do say it, and fond of reading."

He endorsed this statement warmly.

"A very bright girl. And a very sweet one," he said.

The one of whom they were speaking met them at the door and asked smilingly what they had found so interesting to talk about. She had watched them from the window after the firing was ended.

"We were talking about you principally," responded Mr. Hall. "Your sister was saying that you were a

very bright girl, and I was adding that you were a very sweet one beside. Now don't get puffed up with pride, for we may both be mistaken. I am going to send down some school books for you and expect you to be fitted for the University by the time I come next year."

"You aren't going to stay away from us as long as that!"

There was almost a wail in the young voice.

"You may find me in your Christmas stocking, if you hang it in the right place and look very sharp," he said, brightly. "It can only be for a day or two, though. I'll try and make a brief visit if you decide you really want to see me and say as much through the mail."

His good-by to Mrs. Gardner was affecting. Feeling that she might never see him again in this world she took the opportunity to commend her loved ones to him and to express the hope that when he found them motherless he would exercise what care over them he was able. He took the usual course of saying the things he did not believe, in relation to her prospects of improved health, and predicted that she would be sitting up to welcome him when Christmas arrived. On leaving the room he stooped and kissed the pale forehead and felt a renewed conviction that Azrael hovered very near the lowly roof.

Mr. Gardner, who had kept his agreement to treat his guest good-naturedly (which as he had been intoxicated most of the time during his stay, was not

difficult), shook hands with him and said he was sorry he was going.

Mr. Hall made a last effort to be reconciled with Master Jacob, seeking him out in the barn for that purpose.

"I'm off for Olluma to-day, Jakey," said he, "and I'm not coming back till Christmas. What do you want me to bring you then—a pair of skates or a sled?"

"Nothin'," was the short answer and the boy's eyes were bent sullenly on the barn floor.

"You're determined to keep on hating me, are you? Now, that's very foolish. I told Elsie exactly what I said when you got angry with me, and *she* didn't think it was anything to cause such feelings."

"She's a fool!" snapped the lad, his eyes looking up at last and flashing. "She's a d——d fool; but *I* ain't! I'm growin' older every day, too, an' bigger, an' when I'm your size, jest you look out!"

"Oh, pshaw!" was the only reply Mr. Hall could make.

"Pshaw! You don't know us Gardners! My brother did up a man bigger'n you when he wa'n't sixteen, an' I'm ten now! If you don't want no trouble, keep away, that's what you do!"

Here was a revelation! His brother? Victor had never heard there was another son in the family. He could understand, if what Jakey said was so, why there had been no effort to give him that information. Perhaps this secret was the cause of Marian's trouble with her father. He would have liked to know all about it,

but he could not ask questions of either of the other members of the family, and he did not dream of inquiring of neighbors whose houses he must pass on his homeward drive. If the matter at which Jacob hinted had been before the courts, perhaps Mr. Whiteley would know; and yet he did not like to ask him, either.

"Well, Jakey," he said, as he turned away, "if you won't take a Christmas present from me, perhaps you might find one hanging on a tree around the yard when the 25th of December comes. If gold pieces can be picked up by the side of the road, a pair of skates or a sled might get out of Santa Claus' sleigh and fall among the branches of a eucalyptus."

The boy was evidently torn between his tendency to sulkiness and his desire to possess what he was likely to get in no ordinary way.

"If I found anythin' like that on this place—an' it didn't belong to nobody—an' nobody couldn't brag over me that they *give* it to me—or throw their generousness at my head, I wouldn't let it stay there an' spoil," he said, finally, and with a great effort. "But that wouldn't make no difference with me if I found a man foolin' with my sister and gittin' her stuck on him, jest meanin' to t'row her down."

The dark suspicion that had been lurking so long in this diminutive brain—too young, one would think, to even understand its significance—struck Victor Hall like a blow in the chest.

"I respect and esteem your sisters, Jakey, as much as if they were mine," he said, impressively.

"Let Else alone, then!" was the retort. "If yer've got to have any nonsense, why don't yer take the other one. She's used to fellers like you. But yer let Else alone! If yer don't, yer'll wish yer had."

The small speaker took himself out of the way, leaving his auditor more thunderstruck than ever. What did the midget mean! Used to fellows like him! Was there a dark chapter in Marian's history that accounted for her absence from home and the mysterious way in which she returned to it? Mr. Hall wished heartily that he had left the ranch without this interview. Suspicions like these were disagreeable enough without having them fostered by a member of the family.

And, if it were true, what Jakey had almost led him to believe, was it right to have sweet little Elsie under the influence of such a sister? Marian would be the natural head of the family now, while she remained. The mother was sick—she could not know. The father was worse than useless in such an emergency. Victor felt troubled exceedingly. He wished he either knew more or had heard less. It was very aggravating just as he was going away.

It had never occurred to him to set himself up as a protector of innocence and he did not feel entirely fitted to the rôle. What could he do? He put off his departure one day more, in the hope that something would transpire to relieve the situation.

CHAPTER X.

A BUSINESS MATTER.

"I WISH you would look into a business matter for me while you are near Brayton," wrote Whiteley to Hall, in a letter that he received the following morning. "A man named Beal is at work on a gold mine somewhere in that section and he tells big stories of his prospects. If half he says is true (of which you must be the judge) I shall try to raise a few thousands to help him push his work. He has reached the end of his small pile and will make any terms."

In the course of his drives and strolls in the neighborhood Mr. Hall had noticed that mining was one of its industries. Inquiries had failed to show that any very rich deposits had been found, but occasionally a hard worker had succeeded in earning big wages. He knew exactly where Beal was digging and it was very likely on account of a talk with him that the miner had addressed his letter to the Olluma lawyer. Whiteley was not a capitalist himself, but he might be able to secure the necessary sum to still further work the mine if convinced that there were big profits in store.

Mr. Beal was tunnelling only a few feet from the boundary line of the Gardner homestead, and after reading the letter Mr. Hall went over and had a long

interview with him. According to the owner of the claim, the sum of \$5,000 would of a certainty bring fortune to the investor. He backed his statements with certain things in the way of proof, and in response to the direct question offered half of the entire plant for the \$5,000 mentioned, or a third of it for the insignificant sum of \$1,500. Asked what he would take to sell out entirely he declared that he would live on roots and wear his fingers to the bone before he would dispose of more than a half interest. Mr. Hall took samples of ore with him to show to experts and left with a very favorable impression.

Mr. Gardner, who happened to see him talking to Beal, pool-pooled at the idea of the man's claim having more than a nominal value. He said the miners in that section had been at work for years and had averaged less than if they had stuck to the surface of the earth. His opinion was not likely to count for much, however, with the investigator, and Mr. Hall only listened out of politeness while the man rattled on.

"I wish some fool'd come along an' buy *my* place," he said. "There's just as likely to be gold under it as any of the others. I'm sick an' tired o' livin' here, out o' the world. You couldn't find some nice, easy berth for me around Olluma, could you?"

"Nice, easy berths," such as Mr. Gardner seemed to desire, are not very plentiful anywhere in this world and least of all in a growing, pushing California town. Besides, Victor knew that the ranch belonged to the wife, and that she was in no condition to think of

moving, even if the "fool" sought for should be found and come forward with his money.

In the course of a talk that he had with the elder sister, after lunch, Mr. Hall inquired what would probably be her plan of action in the event of her mother's demise. She had led him to introduce the subject by remarking that Mrs. Gardner could live but a short time longer at the farthest.

"Would you and the others be likely to remain here, in that case?"

"I don't know," was her dispirited reply. "Mother, ill as she has been for so long, is the band that ties us together. Elsie and Jacob are too young to go off by themselves, and father is as little fitted for it as they. It is my duty to remain with them, wherever they are, though the glimpse I had of a wider life makes it doubly hard."

"Have you no relations who would take the little sister and see to her for a few years?" he asked, guardedly.

"No, we are quite alone."

"If a chance came to sell the place and move into a town where there are schools?"

"Oh, in that case I presume we would accept it; but it is very unlikely. There is no demand for ranches here. The uncertainty of the rain-fall is the curse of this part of California. The only people who succeed are those who have capital and can afford to wait."

Her tone was sad and he was extremely sorry for her.

"Supposing I should learn of some nice family that

would give Elsie a home?" he began; but she stopped him by a look.

"And leave me to bear this alone? No, I could not do that. Besides, I must guard Elsie if I am left in place of her mother. Strangers would not meet the case at all."

"Have you ever had any other brothers or sisters?" he asked, in what was meant to sound like a casual way.

A covert glance was shot at his face, and then she answered: "I had one brother, but we lost him some years ago."

He could not go farther into the subject, much as he wanted to know about it, and he smiled on Elsie as she came to call Marian to attend the invalid. He thought it strange she should take up the very subject that had been in his mind.

"I have been wondering," she said, "if you couldn't find something for me to do at Olluma. My family used to be well enough off to put such things out of the question, but that's over now, and I don't see the sense of false pride. Marian thinks it would be a regular disgrace to go into a shop, to sell goods, make dresses or trim hats. If you could find a place for me I'd try hard to make her see things as they are. There's no way of making a living for all of us here, and we might as well face the fact."

He looked sympathetically at the earnest young face.

"Perhaps she thinks you too young to go off alone," said he. "There are trials and even dangers to which you are not subjected at home."

She moved her chair nearer to his and put one of her hands on his knee with perfect confidence.

"But *you* would be there. If any trouble came I could go to you with it. I talked with her last night for an hour and spoke about this—and she wouldn't hear a word. I believe she thinks I would be a burden to you and doesn't like to impose on good nature."

"No, Elsie, it is not that. She knows a young man of twenty-three is not considered a suitable chaperon for a girl of sixteen, when he is no relation to her family."

"Oh, bother! I guess you and I could take care of ourselves. If I get desperate I shall just tie up some things in a bundle and run away. When Mannie couldn't stand it that's what she did, and now she wants to lecture me!"

The cheeks flushed and the eyes sparkled with determination.

"Did Marian go alone?" he inquired, gravely.

"N-no." Elsie made haste to get away from the subject, into which she had been drawn farther than she intended. "Oh, well, I shall stand it as long as I possibly can, and then—"

He understood that when the point indicated arrived there would be a sudden alteration of the young life, and he told her in kind tones that she must do nothing without writing to let him know. He was always to be reached in a day or two, and his advice might be of value. She half promised what he asked and then accompanied him to the stable. The Mexican they now hired regularly to work about the place helped them

put the horse Mr. Hall had brought into the buggy. She got in with him, to drive up to the house door, where the last good-bys were to be said, and then announced to Marian that she was going to ride just a little way up the road. The sister's face expressed dissent from the plan, but she did not like to put her thought into words. Elsie was determined and Mr. Hall uttered his farewells and drove through the gate with her.

He let the horse walk, being willing to prolong the time, and for some minutes neither uttered a word.

"I think you will have to get out here," he said at last, drawing in the reins. "It will be quite a walk for you as it is."

She held up a woebegone face and gasped several times.

"I wish you hadn't got to go at all," she sobbed. "Or else that I could go, too. I don't know what I shall do without you!"

"Hush!" he whispered. "You will help take care of those you love. And you will study hard in the books I am going to send. And you will practice with my rifle till you can go out by yourself and kill a deer. And you will write me a letter every week. And you will count the days till Christmas, when I am coming again."

She bit her lips and tried her best to smile, but the gasps came frequently and tears fell from her eyes.

"I mustn't do this!" she cried, springing from the buggy. "I was sure I wouldn't let you see me cry."

but it came of its own self. Yes, I'll do as you say. Good-by, good-by!"

She fairly ran away from him and he started up his horse at a trot. For the next hour he wore almost as sad a face as the one he had left, but the effect gradually wore away. He stopped thinking of Elsie and dwelt again on the insinuations he had heard regarding Marian. What could have happened?

He put together the bits of evidence that had come to him, like parts of a puzzle. Several years before she had suddenly left home. A disagreement with her father over his treatment of a brother was the immediate cause. This brother had "done up a man," according to the expressive phrase of Jakey, "when he wasn't sixteen." And the girl had left home—Elsie said "not alone" in answer to his question—and remained away for a long time. Neither the mother nor the younger sister nor any one else had ever mentioned to him that she existed. It was probable that she was to them a thing of the past, and till the last minute they did not expect her to return.

If she had no relations near enough to send Elsie to, it was natural to suppose she had not been spending her long absence with any herself. She had gone away probably with almost nothing in the way of funds and returned with much better clothing than the others of her family could boast.

Mr. Hall fitted the pieces of the puzzle slowly together, but it was still incomplete.

She did not leave home alone. With whom did she go?

Suddenly it came to him, as natural as anything. Why, she went with the missing brother, of course; the one her father had, to her mind, ill-treated.

Where was the brother now? Marian had said he was "lost," evidently meaning to convey the idea that he was dead. Victor wondered if this was so.

When he reached Olluma, Mr. Whiteley listened with interest to the report he had to make about the Beal mine and took the samples of ore to have them assayed. The young student settled down to the work which had accumulated in his absence, only pausing to read the following from Mr. Keith:

"Morse has brought in another payment on the dividends of the stolen bonds, and it is at your service whenever you choose to write for it. I have nearly \$1,000 now from him. His game is just as deep to me as ever. I'm sorry for the young fellow, but there's nothing I can do for him, of course. ("What does he mean by that?" mused Victor.) You covered your tracks well. Nobody here knows where you are, for I am asked frequently. Glad you are satisfied with your place and that you are going into the firm. Your loss may turn out in the end the best thing that could have happened, though I suppose it will be hard to make you see it that way. I met Miss Fulton again yesterday and she made the usual inquiry. She does not look at all well."

At the end of the week Elsie's first letter since his departure came to brighten his spirits, which any communication in reference to the Morse incident always served to dampen. She was feeling better, she said, and looking forward now to his December visit.

CHAPTER XI.

“THERE WAS ANOTHER, I THINK—A SON?”

THE books Victor had promised for Elsie Gardner were duly sent and he heard from time to time that she was taking great interest in her studies. She hoped to improve so much before he came again that he would see the change. It was evident that a desire to stand high in his opinion was her principal reason for wishing to acquire an education and that his influence over her was distinctly good. Occasionally a letter came also from Marian, but her manner of addressing him was more formal and business-like. There was nothing in any of the communications, however, to throw light on the mysteries that interested him.

The investigation which Mr. Whiteley had started into the question of Beal's mine resulted in the formation of a company to develop that property. An Eastern gentleman of means who was staying at Oluma lent Whiteley and Hall the \$5,000 required to secure a half interest, taking their notes instead of stock. He had apparently more faith in their honor than in the prospects of the venture. According to the original understanding this \$5,000 was applied to developing and extending the mine.

It was soon apparent that the scheme was likely to be a paying one. Mr. Whiteley went out to the place several times and did what business was required, returning quite enthusiastic.

Mrs. Gardner, who had held out wonderfully, succumbed at last to her disease. A brief note from Elsie begging Mr. Hall to come if possible to the funeral, caused him to drop everything and take a drive to the stricken home.

"Mother wanted so much to see you at the last," said the girl, when the particulars of the more important story had been related. "The doctor said you could not get here in time or I would have sent for you then. She had a lawyer, though, from Brayton, and when he went away he left a package for you. It's about something, I think, that she wanted you to do when she was gone."

The package, when opened, proved to be the lady's last will and testament. It was brief and simple, giving what she had to Mr. Hall as trustee, to provide for her family as might seem best to his judgment. It made him also guardian of the minor children, in case her husband should be pleased to waive his rights in that respect, as she evidently thought he would be glad to do.

Victor was staggered for a moment by the weight of the responsibility thrust upon him, as well as affected by the confidence reposed.

"Do you know what this is, Elsie?" he asked, as she looked into his anxious eyes. "It is your mother's will and it asks me to take charge of her estate."

"I'm so glad!" was the impetuous reply. "There's very little to take charge of and it won't be any trouble. I don't think there's much but the ranch left now."

"But there's something else," he continued. "If your father consents, she wants me to be guardian of you and Jacob during your minority. That's a more serious matter."

She tried to understand and finally asked him why it was serious.

"Well, let us take Jakey, for one thing. How do you think he would like to be placed under my authority? There'd be trouble from the start. And you, dear; why, I'd make the worst guardian in the world for you. I like you so well you could do just as you liked, which is not the best thing always for a girl of your age. I don't think I can take such a responsibility. There's Marian, now she's more than twenty-one and ought to serve."

A look of distress crossed the young face.

"If Ma had wanted Marian she would have put it in the paper," said she. "Don't make up your mind yet. We'll talk it all over together before you go back."

Mr. Gardner received the visitor coldly and Jakey acted as he had always done. The great loss they had sustained had not had the effect of entirely soothing either of these strange natures. In response to Victor's request to know how he could serve him in this sad emergency, Gardner mumbled that there wasn't a dollar in the house, or if there was the others

were keeping it carefully from him. He wanted a few little things, a black tie and a new pair of shoes, for instance, and if Mr. Hall could lend him the amount—”

Five dollars was at once handed him, with the result that he went to the village and returned the next day without the tie or the shoes, but with full evidence of having drank heavily. Marian sighed when she noticed his condition and begged him with tears not to touch another drop till the funeral was over at least. The father muttered in a sheepfaced way that he had only taken a little medicine to help him bear his sorrow. Before noon she found a pint of whiskey in his room, which she hid and refused to give up when he came to demand it from her. By this means the husband was forced to attend his wife's funeral in a sober if somewhat dazed condition.

The minister who came to read the service was, with the exception of half a dozen curiosity-mongers, the only outsider there. He was a man of about 27, who had come West for his health and had no settled charge as yet. People called him the “Good Samaritan” because he spent so much of his time with the sick and poverty-stricken. He often held meetings for religious counsel in out of the way places, schoolhouses on by-roads, and even in open fields. He had paid a number of visits to Mrs. Gardner during her illness. Though Mr. Hall had heard of the clergyman they had never met till now.

“Mrs. Gardner spoke much to me about you,” said the minister, in a low tone. “It was a great com-

fort to her, in her last moments, to feel that you would undertake in some measure to fill her place. I should like to talk with you further about this before you return to Olluma."

The services were brief. Besides reading the formal text, Mr. Sewall made a few remarks in excellent taste and prayed fervently for those bereft. The procession to the cemetery was made in ordinary carriages, the coffin carried in a carefully draped box wagon. Nothing so ambitious as a hearse was yet known in the neighborhood. When it was all over Mr. Sewall returned and partook of a sad supper in the farmhouse. Afterwards he motioned to Victor that he wished he would follow him and they took a little walk together.

"Have you decided to accept the trust imposed on you?" asked the minister. "Before you answer, let me say I sincerely trust you have. The little estate left to these helpless people needs the management of a business head, and as far as I can learn no one else has equally their confidence."

"What would you advise me to do, in case I accept it?" said Victor. "Let matters go on as they are as long as possible, I suppose. There is some kind of a living to be made out of the ranch and it would bring very little if put on the market."

"Yes, that is the condition that stares them in the face. And yet neither of the young women will want to stay here if they can help it. The elder, as perhaps you know, was gone long enough to feel the

loneliness of this life and Miss Elsie chafes under it, too."

"How long have you known the family?" inquired Mr. Hall.

"Merely during the past year."

"Then you have only been acquainted with Marian since her return?"

"That is all."

"Are you sure she will consent to remain?"

No, the minister was not as sure as he would like to be. The others needed her quite as much as the mother did. She was now the natural head of the house.

"There was another, I think?" said Mr. Hall. "A son?"

The clergyman was disturbed by the question. He said, "I believe so," in a tone that convinced the listener that he knew all about the matter. There are times when even a man of his calling thinks it best to equivocate. Victor wanted to ask whether this son was still living, but the words would not form themselves. He did not like to worm a secret from unwilling lips.

"There is another matter mentioned in the will," he said, to bridge over the dilemma, "about which I am much more disturbed than the trusteeship of the little property. Mrs. Gardner wanted me to act as guardian for her younger children. If you had any conversation with her about that matter I would like you to say, if you can, why she selected so young a man for such an important post."

Mr. Sewall responded that the reason was the same as in the other case, that of availability and supreme confidence.

"I don't believe I can accept that, at any rate," said the other, in a worried tone. "If the father consents to allow any one to usurp that duty, why should it not be taken by Marian? She is almost as old as I, bright, intelligent, sufficient in every way. The wards are her own brother and sister. I shall do my best to persuade her to accept the appointment, and in any case, unless I change my mind entirely, I must decline it."

Then something came out that did not clear up the situation at all. Mrs. Gardner had had that idea presented to her by Mr. Sewall, and had replied with great positiveness that she would not think of Marian in that connection.

"Well, there is yourself, then," said Mr. Hall, with a sudden thought. "You are just the man. If you will take the place of guardian I will accept that of trustee. When the matter comes before the judge I will suggest you to fill the position."

The idea was not welcome to Mr. Sewall, that was entirely evident, but he was a conscientious man who desired to evade no duty. After a little further debate he said he would talk with Marian about it and give a definite reply before the time when the matter would have to be settled. Perhaps one point had best be investigated at once. They could learn Mr. Gardner's intentions.

Returning to the house they found the bereaved

husband and father smoking in the kitchen. The Chinese cook had gone out for a visit and Mr. Gardner was alone. Carefully they revealed to him the contents of his wife's will and asked what he had to say on the matter.

"There's no use in my sayin' anything," he replied, after puffing discontentedly at his pipe for some moments. "She might have left the ranch to me, knowin' I would do the right thing by the children, but of course she knew my state of health. I shall look to you, then, Mr. Hall, the same as the rest of 'em. You'll see that I have a little ready money, of course. I didn't use to be so hard up, but somehow the world has gone agin' me."

"I would rather Mr. Sewall would take the guardianship of Jacob and Elsie," said Mr. Hall, "leaving nothing to me but the business matters. He is to live near by and can attend to it better than I. Will that be satisfactory to you?"

Mr. Gardner nodded. It was clear that the only thing that interested him was the source to which he must look for his own income. "A little ready money" that he could invest in liquor was the main point at issue.

As Mr. Hall was obliged to return to Olluma in the morning the situation was laid before Marian, who had no objections to offer to the arrangement. Indeed, she approved it highly.

"You didn't want to take charge of Elsie, then?" she said to Hall, with something like surprise in the tone in which she said it.

"No, not in that way," he answered, musingly, and the minister and the elder sister exchanged glances. "Of course I will do anything I can to help her, and—and all of you—but I would rather not have the responsibility."

Learning on further inquiry that there was little if any cash on hand Victor tendered a temporary loan to Marian, which she reluctantly accepted, saying she would return it as soon as possible. In the morning he bade them all good by for the present, soothing Elsie's grief with tender words as he took his departure.

CHAPTER XII.

MR. SEWALL TALKS TO MARIAN.

MR. KEITH wrote occasionally to his friend, giving the latest news regarding Mr. Morse's movements, and referring sometimes to Miss Felton, who was, it appeared, still unmarried and even without any visible sweetheart. These allusions gave Mr. Hall a fit of the dumps, from which he recovered slowly as time passed on. He was, however, much interested in everything that concerned his late trustee, and read every word over and over.

"Morse has been in again with your dividends," said Mr. Keith's letter that came in January, "and I have placed them to your credit. I can't make the fellow out at all. He was reserved enough before, but now he hardly speaks to any one except on necessary business and he has quit attending anything in the nature of a public function. Probably the fear that he will, after all, be discovered hangs like a millstone around his neck. I should not be in the least surprised if he came in some day with a cock-and-bull story about having found the lost property, for I never really believed the other yarn."

"The other yarn?" Victor wondered what "the other yarn" was. It must have been detailed in that

newspaper account of which Keith had spoken before, that newspaper which never reached its destination. He thought he would write to ask for further details, but something drove the matter from his mind when he was inditing his answer; and, much to the advantage of this history, he never learned what the "other yarn" was for a long time afterward.

In the meantime a partnership was formed, under the title of Whiteley & Hall, with his associate. Business came to the new firm enough to keep them pretty busy, and besides this the mine, under the personal charge of Mr. Whiteley, was already paying expenses. The future had begun to look bright for Victor, from a financial point of view. He went occasionally for a day to the home of the Gardners, having been given his papers as executor of the estate, and finding his presence sometimes necessary. A timely succession of showers had brought the orange crop to bearing and for the present the wolf was kept at a reasonable distance from the lowly door. The family remained on the ranch, as formerly, that seeming the wisest disposition of them at present, though the girls chafed at the loneliness of their position. Mr. Sewall had little to do as guardian of the younger children, but he called often and gave them the benefit of his presence and counsel. It soon became apparent, however, that it was the elder sister who acted as the principal lodestone in his case.

Under a thinly veiled pretence of consulting with her about the studies which Elsie or Jakey were pursuing, Mr. Sewall had long talks with Marian, which he seemed to find very agreeable. For a time she accepted

his attitude without suspicion, but at last it dawned on her mind that he was becoming more attentive than she thought it the point of wisdom to permit. She began to excuse herself on the plea of various duties from staying with him alone, and when he came to tea or lunch she managed to keep Elsie in the room as much as possible.

"I don't know how I ever got along without this family," remarked Mr. Sewall, one evening, when the younger sister had gone to some affair at Brayton. "It was a real blessing to me to form your acquaintance."

"You have been very kind to us all," Marian answered. "I'm sure we're grateful."

"I wish I could do more," he said, with straightforward honesty. "I wish, Marian, you would put it in my power—make it my right—to take *all* your burdens on myself. You know," he went on, seeing that she was trying to interrupt him, "that I have more than sufficient means to assume the expense of the education of your sister and brother, besides providing for your father to the end of his days. Marian, if you would only let me——"

Was it a proposal of marriage? It certainly had that sound, and for an instant the heart of the young woman almost stood still in her breast. She had known that the young minister was growing fond of her—too fond—but she had not looked for this. Claspings her hands together she turned her face to him appealingly.

"Mr. Sewall," she said, in a voice that trembled, "I don't know how to thank you for all the kind things you have done for us, but I ought to say now—I *must* say—

that to accept anything further is impossible. Unless you wish to inflict pain you will not allude to the matter hereafter."

He listened breathlessly, and winced as he saw her wipe away a tear that was about to roll down her cheek.

"Do you understand me perfectly?" he said. "I love you, Marian. I want you to be my——"

"Don't ! Forget that you ever thought of such a thing. I have no right to listen to such a statement, much less to consider it seriously. I hope I am not to blame. If I am, I am truly sorry."

It was plain that he was stunned by her reply, and could not rally immediately from the blow she had dealt him.

"If my presence disturbs or annoys you, Miss Gardner——" he began, rising from his chair.

"Oh, please !" she cried. "Don't act any differently toward me than if this had never happened. We can still be good friends, can't we? And don't call me 'Miss Gardner.' Just forget that you ever thought of anything except that you are one of the truest and best friends I have."

Women often say these things and act as if they thought it easy to follow their injunction. It seemed to Mr. Sewall a very hard thing, just then. He would rather have taken himself back to his study in Brayton and let his wound heal as best it might in the solitude of his lonely home. He was a brave man, though, and he liked this little woman too well to cause her pain.

"I want to ask you one or two questions," he said,

after a long pause. "You can do as you think wise about answering. In the first place, is there another? If there is, he has my truest hopes for his happiness."

"There is—another," she replied, huskily. "Now, ask no more."

"Dear Marian, tell me only one thing further. If it is Mr Hall—"

She shook her head decidedly.

"It is not Mr. Hall?"

"No, no, no!"

"Is it any one whom I know?" he persisted.

"I—I think not. Now, please ask nothing else. I have told you this because I esteem you highly. Let us close the matter. Dear, kind friend, you can do that for me?"

And thus it was that Mr. Sewall's dream vanished and that he became the fast and true friend of Marian instead of her husband. He crushed down the hope that had found lodgment in his heart and devoted himself to proving that even a rejected suitor may be worth retaining as a firm advocate. Instead of ending their pleasant relations the incident seemed to bind them closer. Now that they understood each other she need not avoid him, and there was no reason why he might not extend to the younger members of the family any kindness they required.

Another year passed after this event occurred, with little change in the condition of things at the ranch. The income still sufficed, with great economy, to support the little household. Elsie, with Mr. Sewall to help Marian and her own earnest desire to learn, was ac-

quiring such knowledge as is found in books at a rapid rate. Jacob, though a harder subject to deal with, had been cajoled by means of story papers into reading more valuable works, and through small presents of things he coveted into learning the lessons in arithmetic and geography that were set him. Grammar was his main aversion. He declared that he "didn't care nothin' about it," and his lapses in conversation proved his assertion. Indeed, his speech grew steadily worse, owing to the juvenile company he elected to keep.

A shotgun that Mr. Sewall had bought him as a Christmas present was his main delight, except when he was permitted to take Mr. Hall's rifle, that Elsie still retained on the premises. He grew quite skilful with both weapons, and occasionally added something to the scanty fare at the family board from his trophies of bird and beast.

The life of Mr. Gardner underwent the least change of any of them. He still smoked his pipe and drank what whiskey he could get hold of, grumbling when spoken to and complaining of the hard lot a poor man had to endure. The first thing that awoke any special interest in his sluggish brain was the visit of a stranger who wanted to see the proprietor of the ranch and to learn what price would be considered a fair exchange for a deed of it.

He had long hoped that such a proposal would come from somewhere, but when it was actually brought to his attention it almost took his breath away.

"I'm owner of this yer place, about as much as anybody, I reckon," he managed to articulate at last, look-

ing carefully around to see if they were likely to be overheard. "How much do yer calkerlate it's wuth to yer?"

"A better way to begin would be to tell what you ask for it," smiled the stranger. "How many acres have you?"

"Oh, thar's about two hundred, of one kind an' another. We—that is, my wife—give \$3,000 for it eight year ago. Of course," he added, cunningly, "it's ben improved a good deal sence then—new trees sot out and money spent on the barn."

A long conversation ensued, the would-be purchaser making notes in a little book he carried.

"If the property is willed to you and your three children," he said, finally, "I suppose there's an executor or trustee or something."

The connection of Mr. Hall, of Olluma, with the estate was explained and the man departed, saying that he would call on that gentleman without delay.

"You can tell him we're willin' to sell, if he can git the right price," were Gardner's parting words.

With great diplomacy the father worked for the next few days preparing the minds of the others for the change that might be coming. He pictured the pleasure of living in a town and of being where something in the way of "work" could be obtained to help out the fast failing funds on which they had to rely. The crowds of people to be met there were contrasted with the semi-occasional traveller who passed by their present abode. And as Olluma would undoubtedly be the town selected, he even practiced with Elsie on the fond-

ness he knew she felt for Mr. Hall's society, until the girl could hardly contain herself at the prospect.

In a short time Mr. Hall came down, with the stranger, in a buggy, and there was a family council. The buyer had offered \$6,000 in cash for the place, and to take possession as soon as was convenient to the others.

"If you ever intend to sell," Victor told them, when Marian asked for his own opinion, "this seems a particularly eligible opportunity."

There was no dissenting voice when it came to a vote, and the papers were given that bound the executor. A fortnight later the deed was signed, and the Gardners prepared to move to a cottage at Olluma that Hall purchased for them with part of the funds received.

Mr. Whiteley came into his office the next day and drew up a chair in a confidential way to that occupied by his partner.

"Mr. Sherman, who bought the Gardner ranch, offers to sell it at just what he gave," said he. "Now, if you and Beal want to have it hitched on to our property, I'll take it for the company."

"Why under the sun *should* we want it?" asked the astonished listener.

"There's a vein that leads off in that direction from where we're working now," was the reply, delivered with much meaning. "The fact is, I got Sherman to buy it for me, and I'll put it into the concern or not, just as you say."

CHAPTER XIII.

A FACE AT THE WINDOW.

To say that Mr. Hall was astounded by the confession of his friend and partner but feebly expresses the fact. His first feeling was that of indignation; his second that of shame. He was placed in a position of having disposed of property which he held in trust in a way that might bring profit to himself and render the original owners less than an equivalent for what constituted their little all.

It was not enough to reflect that he was guiltless of wrong, so far as his intention went. He had perpetrated an act that he would have been the last person to do had it been presented to him in its bare enormity. Now, what course should he adopt to lessen the injury? Was there really anything that could mitigate the effect of his action?

"I must say, Mr. Whiteley," he began, as soon as he could find words to express his feelings, "that I do not approve of your methods in this affair."

"There is no need you should," was the cold reply. "You sold the ranch for at least double what any other person but me would have given for it. The Gardners were barely able to eke out an existence from the small crops they raised, and could have done

nothing beneath the ground even if they had suspected there was paying ore. If you don't want to have our company take over the land, you need only say so. In that case I shall form a second corporation and begin independent digging."

"But I don't understand why the thing should have been done in this form. If the owners had been told there was, or was believed to be, gold there—"

"They would probably have asked you not to sell it," was the grim statement of the lawyer. "They would have tried to hold on to property they could not develop, and eventually have lost everything, whereas now they receive twice what the ranch cost them. It was by Beal's discoveries while at work on our side of the line that I came to the conclusion it would be wise to add to our holdings. I can't say positively what we shall find, but as a matter of judgment I consider the place worth more to us than to any one else. I want to deal square with you and will put it in at just what I paid, if that meets your approval. I think I have the reputation of being an honest man in business transactions, Mr. Hall."

Hall reddened at the concluding words. He had not meant to imply anything to the contrary in what he said.

"I have a fairly good reputation, I trust, to the same effect," he answered. "And, let me add, I want to keep it, too. This is a much mixed question, Mr. Whiteley. Give me a little time to think it over."

Mr. Whiteley said he could have a week if needed, but added that he could not see how, by the most ex-

cessive straining of the point, Hall could come to the conclusion that there was anything improper in allowing the mining company to acquire possession of this land. It was not yet certain that the purchase would prove a paying investment. If it did not, the Gardners would simply be \$3,000 richer for the error of Mr. Beal. If there turned out to be a good lead it was only a case of luck for the miners and of no loss to any one.

Mr. Hall took a part of the week which he was allowed to go to the ranch on which the Gardner family still lived. He found them all impatient for the day when they would bid good-by to it forever. They listened with pleasure to his description of the little home he had bought at Olluma, and one and all, even including the junior member, thanked him, either by words or looks, for the interest he had taken in them.

Mr. Sewall called while he was there and, though he did not seem as enthusiastic as the others, quietly approved the move. He said the fortunate sale of the ranch had settled a good many problems that had troubled him in his capacity as guardian.

"Our young folks need good schools and will get them," said he. "They need society, contact with people of culture and refinement, and they will get that. They need things that money alone can buy, and with the balance now on hand much can be done in that direction. It seems a providential change that will undoubtedly inure to the benefit of all concerned."

At the mention of "Providence" Victor winced.

"I have recently learned what induced Mr. Sherman to pay so high a price for the place," he remarked. "You know I got more than twice what any of us thought it worth. I considered it my duty as trustee to secure all I could, but if I had heard what I know now I should have tried to make the price even larger, or perhaps refused to sell at all."

The listeners stared at him with open mouths, even Mr. Gardner forgetting to puff at his pipe till the explanation came.

"It is believed that gold will be found here."

"Stuff!" exclaimed the father, with contempt.

"I don't believe they'll get much, do you?" said Marian.

"Why, your mine just beyond here hasn't more than paid expenses, has it?" asked the minister.

"No," responded Victor, answering the last query first. "But of course we have hopes to do better—as all miners have," he added. "Mr. Whiteley wants to buy up this place and add it to our holdings. He thinks there is a vein here that it will pay to work."

Elsie turned her bright eyes upon the young man.

"If there's anything to it, I hope you will," she said. "There's no person we would all like as well to find gold here as you. Still, I should be careful. I'd have people who know about such things make thorough tests before putting good money in."

The sweet voice and the comfort of the words came as a balm to her friend's perturbed feelings. He turned on the girl a look of gratitude.

"What do you say, Mr. Sewall?" he asked next.

"Why, I don't see as it makes any difference to this family now who buys it, if it's for sale. No matter how great a fortune there is here, it's out of their hands. Mr. Sherman wants a big bonus, I suppose?"

With a reddening cheek Mr. Hall said that Mr. Whiteley could get it for the company at the same price the man had paid.

"Then Sherman must have lost faith in it."

Silence greeted this suggestion, broken by Mr. Gardner.

"All the gold they'll git out o' this ranch you can put in your eye, mark what I tell you! Half a dozen times folks have been here and I've let 'em dig holes in different places and it never amounted to nothin'. I don't s'pose my 'pinion's much 'count, but I tell you, Mr. Hall, to let the blamed thing alone."

After a slight pause Victor remarked to Marian that she was the only one who had expressed no opinion on the main question, at which Master Jacob sniffed and turned his face away disgruntled.

"I was only thinking," replied the elder sister, "that if it could have been our fortune to have found a paying mine and kept the place—if we could have become rich out of it—what glorious things we could have done with the money. It would then have been no little cottage at Olluma—and *I'm* not ungrateful, either, for what we've got—but a fine home like those some others have, with horses and servants, and the best education and clothing for Elsie, and—oh, dear! I mustn't let such thoughts run away with me; but I couldn't help thinking!"

A depression fell on the group at these words—at least on all but Elsie. It seemed to her that they were trying to rob their best friend, the man but for whom they might have had far less to live on, might in fact have been compelled to stay indefinitely on the mean old ranch which she hated with no less fervor than ever, whether there was a gold mine under it or not.

“I think you’re treating Mr. Hall shabbily,” she said, with eyes that flashed. “He comes to ask our opinion about what is no business of ours whatever, and you hesitate and hem and haw—yes, you, Marian Gardner, and you, Mr. Sewall—instead of telling him that he has nothing to do as far as we’re concerned but act for his own interests! Would it please you better,” she continued, refusing to take hints that were cast at her from the faces of those she criticised, “if some stranger dug up this ground and made himself rich? I want you to know,” she said, turning to the young man, and walking straight to his side, “that there’s one who can give an answer that isn’t mixed with selfishness. If there’s anything in the place, *I* want *you* to have it. You’ve been the dearest friend to all of us, ever since that day I took you for a tramp and had you fed in the kitchen!”

Then, to the consternation of everybody present, and to that of Mr. Hall above the rest, the girl threw her arms around his neck.

“Elsie!” cried Marian, reprovingly.

She was overcome with shame and confusion, in the presence of the minister, too. But the younger sis-

ter, as soon as she realized what she had done, bolted for the door that led upstairs, and fled from the consequences of her overwrought impetuosity.

Jacob had risen from the floor and taken a pair of tongs threateningly in his hands. Nobody looked at him except Mr. Gardner, who did not comprehend in the least that a tempest was ready to burst in the little head. The father took the tongs from his son, with a whispered injunction to behave himself, at which Jakey went in one direction as fast as Elsie had gone in the other, and slamming the outer door behind him, escaped into the yard.

"It was very kind and honorable of you, Mr. Hall, to ask our opinion on this subject." So said the clergyman, and he did it in a way to quietly take attention from the startling events that had just transpired. "If a trustee sells a piece of property with no thought of benefiting himself personally thereby, and the property is afterwards believed by him to be worth purchasing from the new owner, there is no moral objection to his doing it, that I can see. It is only where the holder of a trust knows or believes that a greater value than appears to exist *does* exist, and manages by surreptitious means to get the property into his hands for less than it is really worth, that moral wrong is done. This, on your statement, does not appear to be that kind of case; and indeed we know you better than to think for an instant you could be party to any fraud."

Although the declaration of Mr. Sewall could not be denied, as a fair proposition, and he assented to it

with a pretence of relief, Mr. Hall was worried over the manner of its construction. There was still a sincere wish in his heart that possession of the Gardner ranch, if it was to be had by his company, could have been obtained in a way that looked less like underhanded. He felt, after thinking the matter over for some days, in all its bearings, however, that he had best accept the proposition of Mr. Whiteley to add the estate to the ownings he and Beal had in connection with him. If events proved that the product was less than anticipated no great harm would be done. If it proved very valuable some way might be found to make the Gardners a sharer in at least the third he would control, perhaps without letting them know the source of their increased income.

When but a few days remained before the family was to bid farewell to their long-time home, Marian, who was the last one of them up, heard a tap on the parlor window at ten o'clock at night, which startled her. She thought of calling one of the others to assist in investigating the sound, which was evidently made with the design of attracting notice, by a person standing outside. An instant's reflection convinced her, however, that none of the other occupants of the house would be of much service, and she pulled aside the curtain.

A young man, exceedingly pale, looked with sunken eyes at her.

With a hastily suppressed cry of astonishment and pain, Marian hastened to the door and admitted the

new comer. Throwing her arms about him she rained trembling kisses on his lips, at the same time warning him that any conversation must be carried on in the lowest whispers.

"*Food!*" he managed to articulate, as he sank, wholly exhausted, into a chair.

CHAPTER XIV.

“HE KILLED THE GUARDS!”

TIPTOEING cautiously to the pantry, fearful of awakening any of the others in the house, Marian Gardner found some edibles for the nearly fainting youth. Tenderly she prepared them and assisted him in conveying the first mouthfuls to his lips. He drank eagerly at the milk she brought, but showed his weakened state when he tried to use a spoon or a fork. Though his clothing was dilapidated, his shoes being worn through in places and his entire appearance unkempt in the extreme, to the girl he was no object of aversion.

“What’s that?” he asked, starting nervously at some slight sound. “Hide me, Mannie; don’t let them take me back again!” And, when she assured him in a confident whisper that he need not fear, he nestled against her protecting arm like a weary child.

“Tell me about it, dear,” she whispered, when he had become partly rested. “How did you escape, and how did you manage to come this long distance?”

“I can’t to-night,” he answered. “I am completely exhausted. Where can you put me till I am able to go on again? The barn—that will be the safest place. I will stow myself away there till morning, when you can smuggle me out a breakfast. Yes, the barn will

be all right—it is better shelter than I have had generally for the past month. There is no moon, no one will see me leave the house. If they come for me they won't be as likely to search there as they would here."

"Are they hunting you?" she asked, tearfully. "Poor boy!"

"I don't know. I've heard nothing, but I suppose they're doing the best they can. No one has been here yet, then? Oh, Mannie, I can't go back! I'd rather die than have them take me to that place again!"

She comforted him with expressions of love and hope, though her heart was ready to sink, and after a little further talk agreed to his plan, unpleasant as it was to turn him out of the house in his weak condition. She said she would manage to see him in the morning and bring him enough to eat, and then they would decide what it was best to do.

"Don't let father know I'm here," he said, darkly. "Poor mother—she was my true friend—has gone and I could not even stand by her coffin. Dear sister Elsie might help if she was old enough, but it isn't safe to let her into the secret. There's one you can tell" (and he brightened) —"he would protect me to the end of his little strength—I mean Jakey. If you think it's not wise to come to me yourself, send him."

Marian promised and then, as he was about to go out of the back door, a thought entered her mind.

"There is another friend I might consult," she said, eagerly, "Rev. Mr. Sewall, who has been here a great

deal and is guardian for the children. He would do anything I asked of him."

The fugitive expressed instant disapprobation.

"A minister! He would be the most dangerous person you could choose. If the police came and asked him outright he would have to tell the truth, and that would be fatal. Good night, dear. Don't lie awake worrying about me. I shall sleep the best I have for weeks, now that I have you near."

Marian stood in the doorway and watched the retreating form till it disappeared through an opening in the stable and then, wiping her tears away, sought her chamber, where after a long time she sobbed herself into a broken slumber that lasted till daylight came.

Rising, she came down and appeared to busy herself as usual about the duties of the house. She anxiously watched her father take the milkpails and go toward the barn—they had dispensed with the services of their laborer the instant the place was sold—and looked occasionally from the window till she saw him emerge with the product of the two cows. As it was clear from his manner that he suspected nothing, she breathed easier. She sat down to breakfast with the others, trying to attract no attention by her distressed face, but Elsie asked her if she was ill, declaring that she looked as if she had not slept a wink. A reply that she had been troubled with an aching tooth explained matters and the kind-hearted little sister volunteered to attend to her duties, advising her to lie down and try to get the rest she needed.

When the table was cleared and Mr. Gardner had started on a walk toward Brayton—probably with the purpose of replenishing a certain bottle that he carried—Marian whispered to Jakey.

“I must tell you a secret,” she said, “and if you let any one know, it will bring great misery upon us all. Can I trust you, little brother?”

The small chap looked at her with suddenly aroused interest.

“*Paul!*” he exclaimed beneath his breath, and his orbs flashed.

“You remember him,” she answered, astonished at the quickness of his guess. “You and he were great friends. Paul loved you more than he loved any of us, I think, and when he fell into trouble you grieved as much as we older ones, didn’t you?”

Jacob listened with his lips setting closer together.

“He’s dead?” he said, interrogatively, and the moisture gathered in his eyes.

“No, dear. He is living—and—are you certain I can trust you, Jakey? You’d do anything in the world for Paul, I’m sure.”

“Come, what’s happened? They put him in jail, I know that, and I don’t see what more they kin do.”

She sat down and drew the little fellow to her side, with an arm around him. He had never taken kindly to petting, and the fact that he endured it now proved how anxious he was to hear what she had to say.

“They put Paul in jail, yes, nearly three years ago. The judge said he must stay there five years and never go outside the walls. They put men all around him,

with guns in their hands, and had big iron doors and great locks to hold him in, but—”

“He killed the guards and got out! Ah! That was like Paul!” The boy was alive with enthusiasm.

The suggestion of the young brother sent a chill down Marian’s spine. For the first time she began to think that something of this sort might have happened. Not knowing the particulars of Paul’s escape she had not connected violence with it, and the intimation frightened her.

“I can’t tell you how he got out,” she answered, with chattering teeth, “but he escaped in some way. If they catch him again he will have to return to that dreadful place and stay even longer than he was sentenced for the first time. I want you to help me protect him.”

The boy looked around the room, as if he half expected to see the familiar face in some corner. His excitement was intense.

“Is he up stairs?” he asked.

“No.” She gazed around as if the walls might have eyes and ears. “He’s in—the stable.”

He drew a long breath and said that was better. Then Marian told him she had a package of things to eat and drink that she wanted him to take to his brother. She impressed upon him the vital importance of his errand. In the first place, he must conceal the articles about his clothing and enter the stable from the rear in a careless way, as if he had no especial matter to attend to there. Once inside he would have to use great judgment in making his presence known to

Paul, and what few words they found it necessary to exchange must be in the lowest possible tones. Indeed, no matter how strong the temptation to talk, he must confine his visit to a very few minutes, and find out what Paul wanted them to do for him during the next twenty-four hours. His return must also be in a roundabout way; and if any one was near Marian at the time he must wait before communicating with her till she was entirely alone.

The lad was restive under the careful instructions and, muttering that he guessed he knew something himself, proceeded to hide the food and a bottle containing coffee and milk among his clothing. Then, with another word of warning from the sister, he proceeded on an errand that filled him with great satisfaction. Not only was he delighted at the prospect of seeing Paul, but there was something piquant in the adventure. It reminded him of those detailed in certain dime novels he had managed to borrow from the boys in the neighborhood, whose heroes had long since decided him to adopt outlawry as a permanent profession when he was a little older.

He made his way as directed to the rear of the stable and entered. Whistling softly, he ascended a ladder to the loft, where he proceeded to take the articles he had brought and put them behind some convenient barrels. He stood up and sang in a low tone a few lines of a popular song, so that Paul might have a chance to see and recognize him in case he doubted whose voice he heard:

There's an orgin in the parlor,
To give the house a tone,
An' yer welcome ev'ry ev'nin'—

"Jakey!" was heard in a faint whisper, and a thin form emerged from its place of concealment.

"Stay where yer are, an' I'll bring the stuff to yer," was whispered back; and a moment later the long separated brothers were locked in a warm embrace.

"Any stranger been around the house?"

"No."

"What's father doing?"

"Went off to town an hour ago."

Paul bit his lip.

"For whiskey, eh? Where does he get the money?"

He drank heavily of the mixed coffee and milk, and bit hungrily at the viands.

"Oh, there's plenty of money sence we sold the ranch," said Jakey. "Didn't yer know?" he added, as he saw the surprise in his brother's face. "Sold the hull t'ing for six thousan', an' we're goin' to live at Olluma."

Paul wanted to know more about the transaction and was given all the information the little fellow possessed, including the probability that the place would be absorbed by a mining company that had been operating on the ranch next to them. Paul heard with darkened face the rumors about gold being found beneath the soil.

"How's Mannie this morning?" he asked, changing the subject.

"Looks as if she hadn't slept none. Yer come last night, I s'pose?"

"Yes; I waited till I thought father was asleep. Does he ever say anything about me?"

"Never a word. He's pretty sour most o' the time. I'm the only friend he's got in the fam'ly, an' I stick to him jest 'cause there ain't nobody else. Say, Paul, tell me how this t'ing happened. I never understood much after yer an' Mannie left here."

Paul listened intently, and then said:

"You're sure no one can spot us?"

"Sure. They'll think I'm off in the woods huntin'."

"Have you got a gun, then?" asked Paul, with sudden interest.

"Yes, two, a shotgun an' a rifle. An' I kin hit a cottontail at a hundred yards."

"Where are the guns?"

"In the house. I'll bring 'em out here if yer say so."

"Bring 'em to-night after dark, and plenty of ammunition. They're not going to take me alive, if I can help it."

"Bully for you!" was the delighted reply. "P'raps I'd better go now. When I come out with the guns, an' it's all still an' dark, will yer tell me th' hull story?"

Paul promised and, with a parting word of caution, retired to his concealment, while Jacob made his way back to the house without observation.

CHAPTER XV.

BROTHER AND SISTER.

THERE are few compensations worth mentioning to the child whose father has acquired an inordinate taste for ardent spirits, but the next evening, when Marian saw her remaining parent stagger with difficulty upstairs to his bed she breathed a sigh of relief. She wanted to have Paul where interference from this source was not one of the dangers to be feared, and the opportunity was gratefully accepted. Elsie was the soundest of sound sleepers. Ah Wing had never been known to stir after his slumbers began, made firmer, no doubt, by the pipe of opium which he was in the habit of smoking before retiring. Jakey was in the secret, and could be thoroughly trusted, and there were no neighbors likely to call after dark. A message was accordingly sent to the barn, advising Paul to make his appearance in the ranch-house, and just after the clock had struck ten he was admitted by the kitchen door.

The food and rest of which he had partaken had already effected a distinct change for the better in his appearance, though he still bore evidence of the trials he had undergone. Though much stronger than on the preceding day, his breath came short and he started at each sound like the hunted man he believed himself to

be. Marian kissed his thin cheeks and put her arm in a sisterly way about his dilapidated coat. She took pains to turn the key in the lock of the hall door, so that in case of surprise he could escape by a window. Then, with Jacob by her side, she sat down near the sofa on which Paul reclined and made ready to hear his narrative.

"I want you to answer me one question before I begin," he said, earnestly. "Do you believe I was guilty?"

The girl hesitated and the silence grew painful. Jacob fidgeted in his seat and finally said: "We'll believe anythin' yer tell us, Paul. If yer did take the stuff, I hope yer've got it stored away where it'll be some use t' yer."

"Hush!" (From Marian.) "I *want* to believe you were innocent, Paul. They said you had a fair trial. God knows, I've hoped it was all a mistake. If you did it, poor boy, you've been dreadfully punished. If you didn't do it, no one can ever make up to you the suffering you've been through."

"Mannie, before my God! I know no more than you what became of those bonds! I never had a thought of touching them, and when they accused me I didn't know what to say. Why *should* I? I had the combination to the safe and could have stolen everything in it, months and months before that time, if I had had such a disposition. There was money there, and it was found all right and straight. If I wanted to steal would I leave that money and take a lot of bonds that I would have to sell at great risk? And then, if I had taken

anything, is it likely I would stay there to be suspected and arrested? Oh, Mannie, I've known all along that in your heart you thought I did it; and that's been the hardest thing I had to bear!"

Tears coursed down the cheeks of the sister.

"On what evidence did they convict you, then?" she sobbed. "What did they have to offer to the jury to make them bring in that verdict?"

"Why, I was the only person, so Mr. Morse swore, who had the safe combination. The lawyer who was appointed to defend me did the best he could, but there was the question—who else could have opened that safe but me? The bonds were gone. Somebody must be punished and the jury were shown that I had been in the reform school before. They thought a bad record in so young a boy was evidence of what might be expected, and they had to have a victim."

The fists of the small brother doubled up and his teeth grated together as he listened. He would have been pleased at a chance to tackle the entire "twelve good men and true" who had done Paul this wrong if he could have been let loose on them at that moment.

"Dear, dear brother," said Marian, winding her arms about the neck of the recumbent figure. "I *do* believe you guiltless, though I must own I have doubted it. I thought you denied the crime for the sake of the rest of us—so that we might say you were unjustly convicted. Forgive me! But now I am firmly convinced. If you had \$40,000 you would not be here in these rags, almost fainting for lack of nourishment. Oh, I know you never did it, my darling brother!"

Paul submitted with satisfaction to her embraces, returning the kisses she showered on his cheeks and lips. It was an hour he had hoped for earnestly during weary months of captivity.

"*Who did it?*" Marian asked, when she could control herself. "If we could only find out!"

"You know what the people of Stromberg said."

"Yes, but I can't believe they were right. Do you know what Mr. Morse has done, ever since? He has taken the interest on those securities out of his personal funds and paid it regularly for Mr." — she hesitated, frightened to see how near she had come to pronouncing the name of her younger brother—"paid it regularly to Mr. Keith for their owner. That looks like the act of an honest man, Paul. In our sorrow and humiliation let us not be guilty of injustice because a wrong has been done to us."

Paul breathed heavily and pressed his palms upon his aching head.

"I never said a word to imply that I thought so, Mannie, either to my counsel or in my evidence. The lawyer hinted the talk of the townspeople to me, and I wouldn't hear to his bringing it into the case. Mannie, I've been a bad boy sometimes, but I've always loved you, and knowing how much you thought——"

He paused, troubled as his sister had been by the eager ears of Jacob, who realized, however, the way the sentence was about to end as well as if it had been audibly finished. The boy rose to his feet, and, with a face distorted with rage, uttered two words with all the angry force of his being.

"*Damn him!*" And when his sister looked at him, thunderstruck, he repeated, "*Damn him!*" with the same vehemence, unabashed by her astonished eyes.

"Who taught you such dreadful language?" she asked, for though Jacob had used similar expressions before, it had not been in her presence.

"*He* taught me!" was the rough reply. "When he stole that stuff hisself and laid it on Paul he taught me what to think of him, and some day I'll say it ter his face. Yer a nice sister, Mannie, ain't yer, to care for that scamp more than fer yer own brother! Wait till I'm old enough ter settle with yer Morse, that's all!"

Marian's face paled at the charge thus brusquely put into form by the small lips. She hed felt for the past two years that this allegation might some time be brought against her, and that it would have to be met, but she had not looked for it from this source. Paul came to her rescue, saying Mannie had troubles enough without listening to harsh talk from her own family; at which Jacob subsided sulkily and resumed his seat.

"There was another clerk in the office with you," suggested Marian, wiping her tears away. "He could have learned the combination, couldn't he, by watching you when you opened the safe?"

"Willie Hayward! I would trust him with my life. And there he is to-day, at his desk right where I left him, pinching himself on the same small salary to help his old mother take care of his sisters. There's a mystery about the loss of those bonds, Mannie, that's too much for me. I made up the combination

I used and neither told it to any one nor wrote it on paper. Mr. Morse always came to me to open the safe when he wanted to get anything. You can see how dark these facts were, coupled with the knowledge that I had been sentenced before."

More to compose her nerves, shaken by Jacob's attack, than for any other reason, Marian said she was going upstairs to make sure that her father and Elsie were sound asleep. She asked Paul to lock the parlor door after her and open it only when he heard four low raps on the panel. She returned after several minutes with the announcement that all was quiet, and the conversation was resumed.

"Tell me how you escaped," she said, rearranging her brother's sofa pillow to make him more comfortable, "and how you managed to make that long journey unaided."

"It was entirely unexpected. I had secured the friendship of the officers long before and was given many privileges not commonly given to prisoners. Among these they allowed me to keep in my cell the clothes I wore when sentenced, and every evening I used to put them on in my solitude and imagine that I was again a free man, unsoiled by the stripes of a felon. It was the one happy hour in the day to me, and as I never broke any of the rules and was regarded as a model prisoner, no special watch was had over my movements. A Y. M. C. A. young man of the city, who devoted himself to lightening the lot of the inmates, brought me books such as were allowed and sometimes spent an evening with me in my cell. He

was permitted to come and go as he pleased, within reasonable limits, for it was felt that his influence was good. Though not a clergyman he was very religious, and never left without asking me to kneel with him while he prayed. I don't believe much in that sort of thing, as you know, Mannie, but his visits were so welcome that I humored him. He is in very poor health, and people say he does not expect to live long.

"One evening, while praying just before the hour for departure, his voice suddenly stopped; he had fallen on the floor of my cell. I picked him up and laid him on my cot, too weak to speak. The thought of escaping by this means suddenly entered my brain. I put on his cloak and hat, rapped to the guard, who was half asleep in the corridor, and actually passed without challenge through the outer gate and into the open world, while the door of my cell was locked on the other man.

"Feeling that I had but a short time before the authorities of the prison would learn of my escape, I put the greatest possible distance between myself and my late home. A freight train I was lucky enough to catch carried me nearly two hundred miles before morning. Then began a series of hidings by day and travelling by night, begging for food, working at anything I could get to do, a voyage by steamer through Lake Michigan, in the capacity of cook's helper, stolen rides again on the rail, and so on, constantly nearing my destination.

"Though sometimes nearly frantic with hunger I

never stole anything more valuable than a ride on the cars. I exchanged the clothes I wore for these which, though much inferior, would lessen my chances of discovery, as a printed description had undoubtedly been circulated concerning me. It is a horrible story, sister, and I do not like to go into it any deeper than is necessary. When I reached this house I was so exhausted that I must have given up had there been a mile further to go. I imagined you had read in the papers of my escape, and I had no money to pay the postage if I had thought it wise to write."

Many times the sisterly arms had clasped Paul during this brief recital, and the sisterly lips had been pressed lovingly to his face.

"We seldom see any newspapers here," said Marian. "We are cut off almost as completely from the world as you were. I am trying to think what can be done now. Day after to-morrow is the time fixed for us to move to Olluma. You would not be safe with us if there is anybody searching for you. I can give you some money, thank God! but I am much puzzled what to advise you."

They talked over this matter for some minutes. It was clear that Paul must act the part of a fugitive for a long time, as there was no means of knowing how earnest an effort would be made to apprehend him. He was willing to work, and did not intend to be too particular as to the kind of occupation, anything being a luxury compared to what he had passed through in his disgraceful confinement.

"I've heard it said that in cases like mine what looks

boldest is often safest," he said. "If I were to go to one of these towns and get employment the chances are a thousand to one nobody would ever think of looking for me there. I dropped our family name when I got out of the reform school and I shan't take it up again till I can look the world in the face and prove I never was a thief. I was convicted as Herbert Brown, not Paul Gardner, you know."

"Dear, dear brother!" murmured Marian, tenderly. "As soon as I get the others settled in their new home I will go to Illinois and try to convince Mr. Morse that a wrong has been done you."

He told her that great caution would be necessary; that she would have to profess ignorance of his escape, as the first requisite; that dust must be blown in the eyes of his pursuers, in case they suspected his whereabouts; and that any letters she sent him would have to be mailed in out-of-the-way places and with great secrecy. All of which she agreed to remember and promised to act with the utmost discretion.

"You have heard of Mr. Keith, the lawyer," he said. "He let me know at the time that he believed in my honesty, but being an old friend of the Hall family he couldn't come into the case. Go to him for advice. He is an honorable man and you will be safe."

Jacob, who had been sitting absorbed in his thoughts for the past ten minutes, had started at the word "Hall," as indeed, had his sister. She had feared much to have that name brought into the debate, but knew no way to warn Paul against it with-

out telling him something she wanted particularly to conceal. The small brain noted not only a name that was his *bête noire*, but the uneasiness manifested by Marian as well. There was something here that Jacob meant to ferret out if possible.

Fearing to continue the interview longer—it was now nearly midnight—Marian suggested that Paul had best return to his concealment, which he did without demur.

CHAPTER XVI.

"SHALL I GO ON?" HE ASKED.

THE removal of the Gardners to Olluma took place at the appointed time, and all of the family were much pleased to get into their new home. To Elsie especially the change from the loneliness of the ranch brought great delight, and the nearness to Mr. Hall, for whom she had grown to have a strong affection, heightened the pleasure she felt. Though she had passed most of her life since babyhood in seclusion from society, she could remember in a dim way her earlier days in a larger community. Mr. Hall had come into her life as a bright sunbeam, and the relations that he had assumed toward her made him fill the place of a parent, brother and friend, on whom she implicitly relied.

Though she was now nearly eighteen years of age her experiences were very meagre, and her first days at Olluma can only be compared in excitement to that of some village girl who makes her first visit to a city. Everything was new and wonderful. The little town was a metropolis, to her narrow perceptions. The small shops were emporiums of surpassing grandeur. The little groups that strolled up and down the sidewalks of an evening were immense concourses of peo-

ple. The conveyances for freight and passengers were a gigantic procession of wonders on which she never tired to look.

On Sunday, when everybody donned their best clothing and went to the churches, she gladly followed, entranced with the crowd, the organ, the singing, even the sermon, more eloquent than she had supposed public speaking could be. With the additional funds at her disposition, new gowns, hats and other articles of apparel, purchased under Marian's more mature direction, had transformed her into what she thought a gorgeously attired young miss. Books, in which she had a decided interest, could be obtained both from the Sunday school and a free library, and she plunged headlong into reading. When an occasional concert or theatrical company visited the place and she was permitted to occupy one of the seats in the balcony, she thought heaven itself must be inferior to the wonders displayed. She used to ask Marian if any troupes as fine as these traveled in the States farther east, and expressed the opinion that nothing superior could possibly be found anywhere.

Nothing was more pleasing to her, however, than the evening calls of the man she regarded as, to a great extent, the cause of her changed life. Mr. Hall had shone like a star of the first magnitude at the ranch, where there were no rivals to be compared with him; and here, among a hundred other young men, he suffered nothing of importance in her eyes. She heard him spoken of as one of the brightest young lawyers and most successful business men of his years

in the town. She often had occasion to notice the deference with which he was addressed, even by men older than himself. It was a miracle that so gifted and important a citizen should take such interest in a friendless child whose acquaintance he had made in a most unconventional fashion.

And while Elsie noticed this of Mr. Hall, she could not help feeling, more than ever before, the striking contrast he presented to her unfortunate father. Mr. Gardner changed none of his habits in his new home, spending all the money he could get hold of for liquor, loafing around the saloons when not occupied with a dirty black pipe at home, bringing nothing to his family, either in material aid or credit. Elsie had not minded it half as much out on the ranch, where there were so few to notice, but here she felt the disgrace of having such a progenitor and sometimes her thoughts were bitter indeed.

The family had one piece of good fortune that deserves to be noticed—they secured that rarity in Southern California, a capable woman, to take the place of Ah Wing, and preside over the exacting duties of the household labors. A widow named Skane, who proved a capable and careful housekeeper, was discovered by Marian in some way and substituted for the Chinaman. Not only did she attend to the kitchen, but her influence was felt in other departments. The family treated her with consideration, when she proved that she deserved it, and she attended to their wants quite as if doing the work of a home of her own.

Master Jakey made trouble at first by getting into

difficulties at the school to which he was sent. His wild habits came reluctantly under the sway of regular rules, and he had a way of answering when spoken to by his teacher which did not agree with her ideas of politeness and discipline. He was really anxious to learn, however, and, after several collisions in which he came out worsted, he settled down to a better comprehension of his relative position in the establishment. On holidays he always loaded a gun—retaining the rifle Mr. Hall had left so long before—and went out into the country after game, generally bringing something for the table as the result of his sportsmanship. Victor tried to win the boy's good will by many little artifices, and a truce was patched up between them; but it was evident no very warm feeling had been engendered in the breast of the strange young chap, in spite of all the efforts used.

It was the full intention of Elsie to discover some way of relieving the family exchequer from the cost of her support, but the impending departure of her sister to the East made it seem best that she should postpone the scheme till her return. Marian, as may be guessed, did not reveal to Elsie anything about Paul's escape from prison, and it was presumed to be for the sake of visiting him in his confinement that the journey was made. The latest misfortune that had happened to the brother was not believed to be known on the Pacific coast, and the family, though pressed down with its weight, was relieved from the additional pain such knowledge among their neighbors would have caused them.

Elsie realized that there was a chapter in Marian's career that had been purposely concealed from her, but she did not make herself uncomfortable on that account. If she had a tendency to morbidness, the full place that Mr. Hall took in her life acted in the opposite direction.

Mr. Sewall, the young minister, had come oftener to Olluma to see them than was absolutely required by the obligations he had assumed as technical guardian of the minor children. He passed most of his time, too, not with them, but with Marian, in whom he could not conceal his deep interest, notwithstanding his bad fortune in seeking a more intimate relationship. Just before the girl was to leave for the East he came on a special errand.

"There is something I must say to you," he remarked, as soon as they were free from listening ears. "And I am at a great loss how to approach the subject."

Without the least idea what he had in mind she replied that she would leave that to him entirely, relying on his good judgment.

"Is it anything about me or my family?" she asked, thinking to aid him, as he was a long time in beginning.

"Not about you—nor," he hesitated for the right expression, "any of your family—in Olluma."

She glanced around in a frightened way, for she could not mistake his meaning. The word "Paul" rose to her lips, but she did not utter it. She sat there eying him with unconcealed uneasiness.

"Shall I go on?" he asked, meekly. Then, when she bowed assent, he continued, "You have one very dear to you, Marian, who has endured great suffering. It is of him that I wish to speak."

"How did you know?" she asked, with straining eyes.

"In a very strange way. I have a friend, a dear friend, who lives in an Illinois town, and has long devoted his failing life to aid those who need help and too often find none. He has always kept up a correspondence with me and has related a great deal of his experience in this self-appointed work. Before I ever knew you he wrote of a bright young man who had attracted his interest and in whose innocence of the charge against him he had come to have full confidence."

"Bless him for that!" interrupted Marian, devoutly.

"All of the facts the young man knew were put in my friend's possession," Mr. Sewall went on, slowly. "He then went to the Governor and urged a pardon, showing how insufficient was the evidence on which a conviction was made, but no favorable result was achieved. So earnest did he become in the matter that it wore upon his spirits and troubled him exceedingly. One evening when visiting the prisoner in his cell—I must use plain words now—he had an attack of vertigo, during which the young man seized the opportunity to make his escape, using the outer garments of my friend to avoid recognition from the guards."

The minister eyed Marian narrowly as he ended the last sentence, and saw distinctly that her brother's flight was no secret to her.

"The name the young man bore in the town where he had lived," pursued the narrator, "was Herbert Brown. His other name (I am not going to speak it aloud) he confided to my friend, with the information that his family lived near Brayton in this State. Interested in the coincidence my friend wrote me, asking if I knew a family of that name, and (you may as well know) it was from this cause that I first became interested in—in that family. I have never said anything to you about this matter, and only do so now because I thought you should know of the escape of—Mr. Brown—and because, convinced that a great wrong has been done him, I wish to offer my services in any way you may suggest."

She managed to say that he was very, very kind, but she was in a peculiar situation. This Mr.—Brown—had himself requested that no person be informed about any of his movements, and she felt bound by the promise she had given him.

"You have heard from him, then?"

"Yes; I think I have the right to say that. I believe, however, that it is best that we drop the subject for the present. If any contingency arises in which you can aid me I shall not hesitate to call upon you."

He thanked her warmly and said he would be glad to have her postoffice address, as he might find it important to write her during her absence. She re-

plied with a blush, as she realized the lack of faith she seemed to show, that he could give anything he wished to Elsie, who would see it was forwarded safely.

Before taking her departure from the State Marian had another secret meeting with Paul, at which she provided him with funds enough for the present and gave him her best counsel. He was now twenty-two years of age—seven years older than when last seen by any resident of California except herself and Jakey—and a full beard that he was cultivating would disguise him beyond probable recognition. Marian urged him to be careful, however, and to wait the outcome of her efforts.

Only a few days after she went away Mr. Whiteley remarked to his partner that they needed an assistant in the office, who was capable of copying documents and attending to minor matters of business. It was agreed that if the right person could be obtained he should be engaged, and a notice of what was required was published in the Olluma Eagle.

Paul Gardner saw it and, with the courage of desperation, decided to apply for the position. Although he had no references in the vicinity, being as he said a "tenderfoot," his manner of address, the specimen of penmanship that he exhibited, and perhaps, more than anything else, the fact that he was willing to work for \$10 a week to begin with, won the day with Mr. Whiteley. He was accordingly given a desk in an inner office, and to his great satisfaction found himself again earning an honorable living.

Mr. Hall was gone at the time, and when he re-

turned the new clerk nearly fell in a faint. It had never occurred to him that Hall of Whiteley & Hall was or possibly could be the man for the larceny of whose papers he had suffered imprisonment. It was clear, however, that Mr. Hall did not remember ever seeing him before and he decided to stay where he was.

CHAPTER XVII.

A STARTLING SUPERScription.

MARIAN GARDNER was gone for some weeks, and Victor Hall came regularly to the house during her absence, feeling his responsibility temporarily greater on that account. Though Mr. Sewall was technically guardian of the ones who most needed oversight, he lived at Brayton. And while there was nothing special required of either of them, it was so evidently agreeable to Elsie to have him come, and so undoubtedly pleasant to himself to go, that the daily visits were begun and continued as a matter of course.

Victor often thought of the hints he had gained from Jacob as to an absent brother—the one who had “done up a man” when he was only a boy, and who was never alluded to in any conversation to which he had listened. Sometimes, too, the strange expression came back to him—“Why don’t you take the other one? She’s used to fellers like you.” In spite of all he could do, a feeling of uneasiness overcame him. He wondered if he ought to separate Elsie from the influence of one who seemed her natural protector.

Business affairs took up his time so thoroughly that every minute of the day was occupied. His law firm was getting the larger share of the county litigation,

besides the drawing of papers and confidential dealings with clients. Mr. Hall had not yet argued any cases in court—Mr. Whiteley attended to that—but he prepared evidence and arranged testimony in a way that made the work of his partner comparatively light. Then there was something always to do about the gold mine, which did not pan out quite as rich as had been expected. In such a case more shrewdness is needed than where a bonanza develops at the start. The lead that had induced the purchase of the Gardner ranch looked as if it was going to “peter out,” to use the phrase employed by Mr. Beal.

This induced Mr. Whiteley to study up a means of getting something out of the surface of the ground. He evolved a plan of starting a town there, the situation being very healthful and sightly. He had streets surveyed, introduced a larger supply of water, and built several houses as a starter for the expected settlement. He advertised the lots in the usual florid way common to new States and not wholly unknown in older ones, but no sales were made. Whiteley and Hall began to find themselves running pretty close to the wind. As Beal had nothing but what he could earn with his hands, the financial prospects of the concern were far from assuring.

Whiteley brought matters to a head one day by calling Beal to the office with a letter, and telling him he must either submit to an assessment of \$5,000, the same amount to be contributed by each of the others, or the concern would have to be wound up. Beal could just as easily have put in a half million as the sum

named, and he was driven to the very point Whiteley wanted.

"I don't know where under the skies I could get any such pot of money," he said.

"Well, then, it's either buy or sell. We're stuck on this thing, unless we can put enough money in to boom the town and drive the digging. Hall and I've got about \$15,000 of good cash in there now. What'll you give us to get out, and if you can't pay cash let us have your notes, with security on the property?"

"I couldn't run the thing alone," sighed the miner. "What would you and Hall give me for my third—spot cash? Perhaps we can trade that way."

Mr. Whiteley, who had now got the matter just where he wanted it, said he would consult with his partner and let him know in a few days. Something had got to be done. Unless a good deal more money was invested, all that was there would drop out of sight and never again be seen.

Knowing by experience that Mr. Hall had a vein of conscientiousness in his composition, Whiteley approached the subject guardedly. He related the condition of affairs, which his partner could not deny was dubious. He spoke of the need of putting more money in, and of the impossibility of Beal's responding to a call. Finally he brought in the offer of the miner to sell his interest, without mentioning how it came about that he made it.

"If we can get his third," said Whiteley, seeing that the idea made a deep impression, "and then secure enough funds to push the work on the tunnel, I've no

doubt we will soon be in a position to make the thing pay handsomely. It would take, I suppose, \$5,000 or more to settle with Beal, and we ought to have twice that in the treasury to go on with. Could you raise \$7,500 at short notice, as your share? "

Hall looked at his partner out of the corner of one eye. Was Whiteley trying to freeze him out, too? If he was, he would find he had undertaken no easy task.

"I think I can get it," said he. "There are two or three strings I can pull back East, if it seems worth doing. You've no doubt of your own capacity in the same direction, I suppose? "

Whiteley reddened a little at this, and replied that he had been in correspondence with a man who controlled capital and wanted to loan some of it in that section. He thought, with the prospects of ultimate success, he could get his share of the money required, without doubt.

Another talk was had with Beal, this time at the mine, and after backing and filling for some hours, the miner consented to accept the \$5,000 offered him and to assign his shares, half to each of the others. He was discouraged and thought he would seek his fortune in some other part of the country.

Hall left town for a week, saying he would have to make a journey of that duration to secure his funds, and when he returned brought with him even more than the sum he required. He explained that it was necessary to secure his creditor by an assignment of his shares in the corporation, of which he now owned fifty per cent., and Whiteley admitted that he would

have to do the same thing. The assignments fortunately did not have to go on record, but that of Hall was made to his old friend, Mr. Keith, while that of his partner, to Victor's astonishment, bore the name of Oscar Felton of Stromberg, Ill.

"I have learned from Mr. Felton that he was once acquainted with you," said Mr. Whiteley, as he saw the astounded look on Mr. Hall's face. "He was looking for a good rate for some money he had to invest, and I managed to convince him he could trust me. I've never seen him, the whole business being conducted by mail, but he's coming out here by-and-by and you'll have the pleasure of meeting him again."

The expression on Mr. Hall's face did not indicate that much "pleasure" was anticipated from the meeting referred to. He was in fact greatly distressed at what he heard. It brought up a long train of thoughts that caused him uneasiness. As soon as he could recover partial equanimity he plied Whiteley with questions: How had he heard of Mr. Felton? In what manner had Mr. Felton learned that he (Hall) was in the office with Whiteley? What had he said about him, in the exact language, if possible?

"It was rather odd," said Whiteley. "I saw an advertisement in a Chicago paper, stating that the advertiser had money to loan on Western property. I answered it, naturally using the letter heads of our firm. Mr. Felton, in his reply, mentioned that he believed my partner was a young man who came from his section of the country, and that he hoped our relations would be pleasant and profitable to all concerned.

This, with the enclosure of a draft for \$6,500, the amount I needed to complete my agreement with you, was about all there was to it, except the statement I have referred to, that he would come at as early a date as convenient to visit this section and perhaps invest other moneys here, if I had anything to recommend."

Victor's brow cleared somewhat as his partner reached the end.

"I only want to say," he remarked, "that I'm glad you didn't get him into any relations with us as a firm. He's all right as far as you are concerned but he couldn't do any business with me. Don't ask me the particulars—it was a wholly private affair—only if you learn in time of the date he expects to arrive in Olluma, give me a chance to take a vacation until he has left town."

Whiteley, though with much wonder in his eyes, gave the required promise. The newly-arranged corporation went on with its business and—as happened more than once in similar cases—prosperity attended it from the start. Good fortune, that had dodged the tripartite partnership, had only been just around the corner, and showered her smiles on the dual owners.

"It's always the darkest hour just before morning," and "It never rains but it pours," were some of the expressions that Whiteley made use of to indicate the altered conditions. It was in fact marvellous how everything came their way, once the tide set toward the shore. "Pay dirt" of a very rich quality was found not fifty feet from the line at which they had crossed the Gardner ranch, while investors in house lots, who **had been holding off** so long, came in shoals and

planked down their money. Stories of these extraordinary happenings got into the newspapers (not wholly without the knowledge in advance of Mr. Whiteley) and both partners were soon approached with offers of unlimited capital, should they need any, or several times the cost of their investment, should they prefer to sell out at that stage.

Victor grew quite dizzy at this influx of prosperity. He had long hoped for something of the kind, and had believed in his heart that it would be his fate to achieve it, but now it was here it almost frightened him. The fact that the new profits came almost altogether from the Gardner tract added greatly to his uneasiness. Everything seemed honest enough, as far as he was concerned, in the acquirement by his corporation of that property, but he was in the disagreeable position, for all that, of sharing in immense gains which ought, he was half persuaded, in equity to belong to others.

Sometimes when Whiteley talked in an exhilarated strain of the fine returns they were having, Hall could not help adverting to this phase of the question.

"I wish we had taken the Gardners into partnership," he used to say. "It seems hard that, when they need money so much, it should have been taken away when almost within touch of their hands."

"Bosh!" the other would exclaim. "Don't encourage hypochondria. That ore was there millions of years before they bought the ranch, and would have been there a million more for all they would have known of it. They got a big price, much bigger, I assure you, than they would, but for your friendly of-

fices. Not a cent of all we're taking out now, by our capital and courage, can by the wildest reasoning be shown to belong to them. But," he added, with a laugh, "if you persist in thinking otherwise, you have a remedy that can be applied even yet."

Hall looked the inquiry that naturally arose.

"Why, hand them your half of the profits as fast as received. You'll admit that something belongs to the enterprise and skill that has developed the mine and the town site. I'll take that half as my share, and you can give up yours in the way I suggest. I guess, when it comes to that, you'll think twice, though. You've a tender heart, my dear fellow, but you mustn't let it run away with you on a matter of business."

Mr. Hall decided that it would be right for him at least to get out of his investment enough to pay for the cash he had put into it, and as this would take some little time, with the new machinery, expenses connected with laying out the lots, etc., he dismissed the matter from his mind for the present. But when his tranquility was restored on this point it was disturbed almost immediately on another, as is often the case in this world of trouble.

Happening soon after into the postoffice to get the mail from the lockbox which his firm hired there, the postmaster accosted him with a question:

You know everybody in this region, I think, Mr. Hall. Here is a letter that's been here a week and I don't remember any person of that name. At the hotel they are in similar ignorance. Have you ever heard of a Mr. R. A. Morse around these parts?"

Like one dazed Mr. Hall regarded the speaker, as the letter was put into the hand he mechanically stretched out to receive it.

Mr. Richard A. Morse, Olluma, Cal.

It was an innocent enough address, but what added to the astonishment of the young lawyer and confirmed him in his suspicion of the identity of the owner was the distinct stamp in one corner, "Stromberg, Ill." What could his old enemy be doing, that people addressed letters to him at this place?

"I don't think—there's any such man here," he managed to articulate, and turned abruptly away.

"He must be coming," he added, breathing hard, as he walked back to his office. "Is it a mere accident, or has he in his mind some new annoyance for me? I'll risk a wire to Keith, and see what he knows about it. I'd rather see the evil one himself than that same oily, sneaking hypocrite."

The answer from Mr. Keith came promptly:

Man left town several days ago. Know nothing else about it.

"He's coming without doubt," mused Mr. Hall, darkly. "Well, I won't be here to lose my temper over him."

He closed up a few affairs, locked his private desk, wrote a note to Whiteley that he was going down to the mine, and then called the new clerk from the next room.

"I'm going out of town," said he, "and can't tell

when I shall come back. If a man named Richard Morse calls to see me tell him that, and write me what answer he makes, at the postoffice in Brayton. Understand, I want to get rid of the man. Make no mistake now."

"I will be careful, sir," answered the new clerk, in a scarcely audible whisper.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"YOU CAN'T STOP FOLKS TALKING."

GERTRUDE FELTON was the idol and pet of her father. In the seemingly severe way he had treated her when the question of an interview with Victor Hall was mooted he had done only what he thought for her best and lasting good. When he saw her fall to the floor in a faint, when the physician who was summoned looked grave and said she had evidently suffered a violent shock, when the recovery of the young woman took weeks, and when her spirits seemed entirely broken, Mr. Felton began to realize that he had gone too far.

But by this time there was little he could do to comfort her. Victor had left town and nobody, so far as he could learn, knew where to find him. He had gone in anger and distress, in a mood that might fairly be called desperate. The only destination that could be ascribed to him was the very indefinite one "Out West;" which, it will be admitted, is a territory rather wide in extent.

Convinced that if he persisted in his daughter's making a marriage such as he had intended, he would soon have no daughter at all, Mr. Felton reluctantly resigned his dreams of glory. He told Gertrude he

would do his best to find Mr. Hall and if the young people were able to come to any agreement in regard to their future, he would not stand in their way. Gertrude smiled faintly and kissed her parent's cheek in gratitude, but whispered that she had little hope that Victor would be found, or that, in any case, he would renew his courtship. She said he was a young man of high pride, which had, she feared, been too deeply wounded to risk another rebuff. But the father comforted her with better predictions, and the little gleam of hope that came to her bosom brought her up from the sick bed and out into the world once more.

Feeling reasonably certain that Mr. Keith knew Hall's whereabouts, Mr. Felton used every means he could think of to worm it out of him. True to his promise, however, the lawyer continued to express ignorance, quoting as proof the fact that although the newspapers, far and wide, had printed accounts of the arrest of Brown, Mr. Morse's clerk, no word had been received from Hall by any one in authority.

"He told me he was going West," said Mr. Keith, "and that when he got settled he would let me know. Probably it takes him longer than he expected."

When the trial of the clerk came up, Gertrude was able to attend one of the sessions. She saw the prisoner in the dock and the prisoner saw her. With the natural kindness of heart of a young girl, she pitied him, but it never occurred to her to doubt the correctness of the jury's decision. She pitied Victor, too, who had sustained this great loss, at a time when he needed his fortune especially, for though he could

not get hold of the principal (he had talked that matter over with her) the income would be worth much to him while struggling for a foothold in a new part of the country. She did not know of Morse's resolve to keep up the dividends.

As time passed on the girl spoke to Mr. Keith with her own lips, more than once. One day he told her that Mr. Morse had paid him the interest on the lost bonds, and that he was holding it for Mr. Hall. This seemed to indicate more than ever that Victor had dropped all communication with his former friends, and she grew melancholy again at the thought that she might never hear from him. Perhaps he had succumbed to the privations of frontier life!

Her father, when this idea was suggested, told her it was extremely improbable. Victor was in good health, young and resolute. He was very set in his ways and having decided to abandon the East had doubtless gone to the full extreme in that intention. Mr. Felton said he would try some new scheme to ascertain his whereabouts and felt certain he would succeed in time.

As anxious now as was Gertrude to find Mr. Hall, Mr. Felton took a dozen ways to accomplish that end, some of them suggested by a detective with whom he went into correspondence. When one plan failed he was ready to try another, and his confidence sustained the hopes of his frail daughter, who was in spite of all efforts sinking in health. One of his ideas was to advertise in a large group of Western newspapers that he had money to loan at a low rate

of interest. It was in answer to this that the letter from Mr. Whiteley came, along with a thousand others of no interest to him. When Mr. Felton saw on his desk the heading "Whiteley & Hall," with the words "Abner Whiteley, Victor Hall," below it, he could hardly contain his delight. He hastened home and cried to Gertrude, "We've got him at last, my girl!" and nearly threw her into a dangerous palpitation of the heart by his abruptness.

It seemed the most sensible thing Felton could do, when Mr. Whiteley sent his prospectus showing that the mine was going to be a great success and that all he wanted was \$6,500, for which he would pledge his shares, to let him have the amount without delay. If anything happened to Whiteley's calculations, and the shares were forfeited, it would make Felton a sort of partner with Mr. Hall, a thing he would welcome with delight. He had now also a good excuse for appearing at Olluma, for examining the property at Brayton, for frequenting the offices in which Mr. Hall was to be found.

In response to many questions Mr. Whiteley wrote his patron considerably more about his partner than he communicated to that young man. Thoroughly pleased at Felton's interest in the mine and town-site, he was glad to oblige him in every way, agreeing at the same time to keep from Victor the knowledge that such facts had been asked for or forwarded. When Felton learned that there was "a young woman named Gardner," to whom Hall was paying much attention" (in the words of Mr. Whiteley), he decided

that it was time to move his forces to the scene of conflict and, in the words of the immortal soldier, "move immediately upon" his "works."

New strength seemed to come to Gertrude when she found that she was to be taken on a journey that would probably bring her face to face with the man she loved. She made elaborate preparations, laying in a large stock of lovely garments, feeling that her impression on Victor should be influenced by every adventitious circumstance. On arriving at San Francisco they received a letter from Mr. Whiteley, saying that Mr. Hall had gone away for a few days and that they had best come at once and get comfortably settled in town before his return. This removed the dim apprehensions that had begun to creep into Gertrude's mind, and she went forward with a lighter heart.

"I'm sorry I can't spend much time with you for a few days," said Mr. Whiteley, as he was riding with them in a carriage to the hotel. "My clerk was taken ill a few days ago, which leaves an extra burden on my shoulders, with Mr. Hall away at the same time. However, I will make up for this later."

"Your firm is evidently doing a large business," said Mr. Felton.

"The largest in this part of California. Since I took Mr. Hall into partnership we have had more cases offered us than we can attend to. The mine and the surrounding interests, too, are looking splendidly. I shall be glad to take you down there next week."

The day after the arrival of the Feltons two other passengers known to the reader left the train at Oluma. One of them bore a decided resemblance to Mr. Richard Morse, and the other was recognized by several people at the station as Miss Marian Gardner.

As soon as Marian could do so she made a hasty visit to the offices of Whiteley & Hall, to warn her brother that Mr. Morse was in town, and that he had best keep out of the way for the present. The office boy told her Brown was ill and had not been at work for several days, which convinced her that Paul had in some way learned of his danger and taken warning. Returning home she got Jakey to go to Paul's lodgings and learn what, if anything, he wanted her to do.

Mr. Sewall came to town during the day and sought out Miss Gardner. He had been troubled by a letter just received from his friend in Illinois. It told him that Marian had been in town, had called at the prison and asked to see her brother (evidently with the hope of throwing the authorities off the scent, in case they suspected her of knowing his whereabouts), and had probably been followed by detectives, who believed they would find, by keeping on her track, where Paul was hiding. Mr. Sewall had stopped at the hotel, before coming to the house, to see if any strange looking men were there, and had come across the name of "Richard A. Morse, Stromberg, Ill.," on the register, with those of "Oscar Felton and Miss Gertrude Felton," of the same town, recorded on the

preceding day. Such an influx of Illinois people boded no good, he feared, to the escaped prisoner.

"You know Mr. Morse, at least," he said, as he finished the main part of his story. "He was the prosecutor, I think, when your brother was arrested?"

"I do know Mr. Morse," said Marian, shivering, "and he is the man you suspect. He came on the train with me. I have already been to warn Paul, but he must have got word before in some way, for the office boy reports him absent. Now I have sent Jacob to see what, if anything, he wishes me to do."

"Do you know whether Mr. Morse suspects Paul to be in this vicinity?"

The questioner had learned of Paul's nearness from Marian by mail.

"I fear it, though he professes to have made the journey for the sake of conferring with Mr. Hall."

"Did you talk with him about your brother? About the question of not opposing a pardon?"

Marian told her whole story then. She had gone first to Joliet, where she asked for the prisoner Brown and expressed surprise to hear that he had vanished. She then went to Stromberg, where she asked Mr. Morse if he would still oppose an attempt, should one be made, for a legal termination of the case against the convict.

"What did he say to that?"

"He said that a pardon would not be likely to be granted to a prisoner who had escaped from custody; that as Brown was now free, one was not necessary; and that, in any case, before he would interest him-

self for the young man, he would have to restore the \$40,000 he had taken. All of which rendered my journey worse than useless."

Mr. Sewall talked anxiously about the brother, fearing that he was not safe in Olluma, and offering him an asylum at his house in Brayton. Marian brought him a photograph of Paul, taken several years before, and said he now had a full beard that altered the face thoroughly.

"Jakey admits that he would never have known him when he arrived here but for my information. Elsie has spoken with him twice at the office, when she has been there to see Mr. Hall, and suspected nothing. I think he could not be safer, for surely that is the last place they would dream of finding him. However, I will let him know of your offer, and if anything transpires to cause alarm he will gladly, I have no doubt, accept a refuge with you."

Mr. Sewall asked if she knew anything about the Feltons of Stromberg, and she told him that they were wealthy people, having no doubt come West on a pleasure trip.

When the minister left the house of the Gardners he met a man coming into the yard whom he recognized as the person at the hotel who had been pointed out to him by the clerk as Richard Morse.

"Pardon, sir," said Mr. Sewall, speaking on the impulse of the moment. "Whom do you wish?"

Mr. Morse looked at the questioner critically but without any assumption of displeasure. He essayed

to continue his walk without replying, but could not do so without pushing the other aside.

"I have called," he said, finally, "to see a member of the family."

"Which one?" persisted Mr. Sewall, surprised at his own nerve.

The front door opened and Marian appeared.

"Walk right in," she said. Then, as if she had just noticed Mr. Sewall, she added a few words, presenting the men to each other. They bowed coldly and formally, and, Mr. Sewall stepping aside, Morse passed in. The door closed again and the minister went up the street, his head reeling.

"Can she have asked him to call?" he said to himself, "and if so for what reason? Does she expect to persuade him? I have heard he is a very hard man. What influence can she hope to bring to bear on him, when he has refused so long?"

The problem was too great, and he did not like to go back to Brayton without some further effort to solve it. He went to the hotel, registered, and decided to remain overnight, instead of taking a moonlight drive home as he had intended.

In the way of travelers the world over he got into conversation after supper with Mr. Felton who, learning that he knew Mr. Hall, made a great many inquiries about that gentleman, stating that he had known him in the East and his father before him, and had the greatest confidence in his ability and integrity. Gertrude had retired to her room and the conversation between the men was uninterrupted.

"There is also in town another resident of Stromberg," said Mr. Sewall, when he found a chance to introduce that subject. "You know him, I suppose?"

"Mr. Morse? Yes; he is an insurance agent."

"A man of high standing and character, I presume, being in that business?"

"Well—I don't know as anyone could prove to the contrary. He's considered rather queer, though, by many. You may have read in the papers of the robbery of his safe by a clerk, several years ago, of \$40,000—or more likely have heard the story from Mr. Hall, to whom the property really belonged. You have? Well—I express no opinion of my own—there are people who've always believed Morse knows more about the disappearance of that package than he would like to admit. Mind, I don't say I think so, but you can't stop folks talking, you know."

CHAPTER XIX.

MISS FELTON BEGINS HER TASK.

It is not difficult for people who come to spend a short time in small towns, especially when they have every evidence about them of prosperity in the things of this world, to get acquainted. Gertrude Felton learned from Mr. Whiteley, through her father, what family it was that Mr. Hall devoted most of his attention to in Olluma, and an introduction to the Gardner home followed speedily. "Friends of Mr. Hall" was the only recommendation needed and the humble courtesies of the home were tendered by both the sisters. In return Gertrude hired the best pair of horses the local livery afforded and easily induced the girls to take drives with her through the surrounding country, taking one at a time, the better to pursue the investigations she had in mind.

The first one taken on these excursions was Marian, and the conversation led from one thing to another, now being upon the affairs of the vicinity and then having reference to those of the East. The girls were not far from the same age and notwithstanding the difference in what is usually called their "social rank" they had no difficulty in making themselves agreeable to each other.

"Have you known Mr. Hall long?" was one of the first questions that Marian asked, when she found herself alone for the first time with Miss Felton.

"Since childhood. He used to come to our house when he was only entering his teens and continued up to the time he left Stromberg. We were in fact great friends and I regretted his going away very much. The acquaintance of his father and mine dates back many years. You find him very agreeable, I am sure."

To this Marian returned a warm affirmative. She told, with no pretence of concealment, of the relations Mr. Hall had sustained to her family and of the kindness he had shown in taking care of their small fortune after her mother's death.

"Your sister is a very sweet girl," commented Miss Felton. "I do not blame Mr. Hall if he finds her society very pleasant indeed, which I am told is the case. I have a mind to tell you something about myself. Yes, I will. Had it not been for the ill advised interference of my father, Victor and I might now be occupying much closer relations to each other.

The listener looked deeply interested and Gertrude went on to tell of Mr. Felton's ambitious plans for her, in which she had never shared, and which had resulted in his almost forbidding Mr. Hall the house. She had long since convinced him that he was in the wrong, however, and when Victor and she met she believed everything would be made right again. She mentioned the fact that her father was a millionaire and that she was his only heir, not with anything like arrogance or superiority, but as if it was the most natural

thing in the world, and Marian liked what seemed her unaffected confidence of manner.

"Then you love Mr. Hall as much as ever?" Marian said, softly, when the other paused.

"Yes," was the answer, delivered with much feeling. "I shall never care for any other man, no matter what 'brilliant' offers may come to me. I have no sister, dear Miss Gardner, and it does me good to tell you this, and to feel that I can implicitly trust you."

On another day, when Elsie was substituted in the carriage for her sister, Gertrude reverted to the same subject, though from a slightly different point of view. She wanted to judge from her manner whether anything stronger than friendship existed between her and Mr. Hall.

"He is making a great success at the bar, I hear," she said, when they were well embarked on the theme that interested them both. "I do not suppose he will care to spend the whole of his life in California, when he feels that his fortune is sufficiently assured."

"Why not?" was the wondering reply.

"Oh, the brightest men in the law drift back East, where the prizes of the profession are greater. Mr. Hall came here (shall I tell you?) under the pressure of a personal disappointment. When that trouble is removed it is only natural to presume he will return to Illinois."

Elsie's lips began to tremble.

"I know all about that," she said. "You mean, his lost property."

"Not altogether. He feared he had lost something

else at the same time—something of more importance to a young man than wealth. There was a mistake about this, which he went away too quickly to have explained.”

Elsie repeated the words vaguely, “More important than wealth?”

“Yes, dear. Victor and I were close friends. My father had decided that I must marry some man of high station, he being the richest citizen of his town. It was what he said to Victor on this subject—without consulting me—that led to his sudden departure for the West.”

The poor little heart was crushed in an instant. She did not know how to pretend. She only said, “Stop the carriage, please! I don’t want to ride with you any further. I want to get out.”

“Why, my dear child, have I hurt you?” exclaimed Gertrude, much alarmed. “Don’t leave me, I beg. Let me at least drive you home. Can it be,” she added, as the horses were turned in an opposite direction, “that you care for him yourself?”

Elsie caught her breath in a pained gasp. The eyelids that she lifted to her companion’s face twitched nervously.

“Do I care?” she repeated. “He is all I have! Are you going to take him away from me? You are rich. You have so many things, while I—I have only him!”

Big tears rolled down her cheeks as she plead in her simplicity for what she valued more than life. She did **not** know that it would be the proper thing to

hide her agony, to pretend that her soul was not pierced as with an arrow. She only knew that this handsomely dressed girl talked of robbing her of her dearest treasure; and she asked her—as a child might plead with a burglar—to let it alone.

“I am very sorry,” said Miss Felton. “You are so young—I never thought— Has he asked you to marry him, then? He cannot have done that!”

“No,” was the honest response. But I can’t—have him go away. He is the dearest thing on earth to me. I have not thought of marriage, I’ve only thought that he would always be here—and that I should see him every week of my life.”

She closed her swollen eyes wearily. “I cannot have him go! I cannot!”

Miss Felton fell her ground slowly.

“It is very wrong of him if he has encouraged such thoughts in your mind,” she said, in a low tone. “Do you see this ring on my finger? He gave it to me, five years ago, as a token, and he has never said or written a word to take back the pledge he gave with it.”

But Elsie only repeated, “Take me home! I am faint. Take me home!”

There was nothing else to do and the horses were driven in the direction of the Gardner house. On the way Miss Felton said a hundred things to brighten the weary eyes and bring a little comfort to the sad face, but nothing availed in the least. Marian saw them from a window and ran out to help Elsie in.

“She was taken with a faint spell,” said Miss Felton, “and asked me to bring her back. A little rest

will restore her, I nope. I will run over this evening to see if there is anything I can do."

The girl was helped to a bed on the lower floor and Marian asked what had caused her illness. When she refused to answer, a suspicion of the real reason came to the sister's mind. She had no doubt Miss Felton had been talking of Mr. Hall to Elsie, and had hurt her feelings in some way in regard to that matter. She did not think it wise to talk about it then, but acted the part of a faithful nurse, soothing the child with gentle words and bathing her face with cooling liquids; the result being that a refreshing sleep came at last to the tired head.

When, several hours later, Elsie arose, she removed the traces of grief as far as possible and sat down to supper with the rest of the family. To Marian's question as to how she felt replied with a firm voice, "I'm all right, Mannie. I never shall have that kind of attack again."

She passed the evening up stairs with Jacob, hearing him recite his lessons, in which he had begun to take great interest. When Miss Felton made the promised call she said over the ballusters to her sister that she was too busy to descend.

"I am distressed beyond measure, Miss Gardner," said Gertrude, when the answer was brought to her, "at the condition in which some simple words of mine left your sweet little sister. I was telling her as I did you of the relations Mr. Hall has sustained toward me, and happened to speak of this ring, which cemented our engagement five years ago. I do not blame her

for being fond of him—I do not see how any one can help it who knows him—but I did not look for anything like this. She asked me to take her home at once, saying she was faint and, of course, I did so. I hope, when she has time to reflect, she will forgive me if I was too thoughtless, but really, how could I anticipate the way she would feel?”

A knock at the front door prevented the reply that rose to Marian's lips, and there being no servant to attend to that duty she went to open it herself. Mr. Richard Morse stood on the threshold.

“Ah, you have company! I will call later,” he said.

“I am just going,” said Gertrude, rising. “I think I have met you at Stromberg, Mr. Morse. I am the daughter of Mr. Felton.”

“Yes,” he said, hardly raising his eyes to her. “I knew you were at the hotel here. I hope I have not disturbed you.”

“Not in the least.”

A few minutes later Marian called up the stairway, “Elsie, aren't you coming down again to-night?”

“No.” The younger sister appeared at the upper landing. “Jakey has gone to bed and I am going, too. My head aches still.”

“Is father asleep?” (This in a very low whisper.)

“Long ago.”

“Good night then, my darling.”

“Wait a moment, Mannie. I want to kiss you.”

Stockinged feet tripped down the stairs and the two girls held each other for a moment in a warm embrace.

"Are you coming up pretty soon, Mannie?"

"Pretty soon."

A masculine form paced to and fro in front of the cottage, on the opposite side of the street, till nearly eleven o'clock, watching the light in the windows of the room where Mr. Morse and Marian sat. When at last the insurance man emerged and took his way toward the hotel, the form crossed to the house and a hand tapped on the door.

"Why, Mr. Sewall! What brings you at this hour?"

"Miss Gardner," came the shaking voice, "why has that man been here again?"

"Surely you ought to guess. I am trying to arrange with him for my brother's pardon."

"And can you afford to pay a price like this?" demanded the minister, with terrible meaning. "Is your brother's liberty worth purchasing with his sister's reputation?"

"Mr. Sewall, you are insulting!" Marian essayed to close the door.

"I asked you once to be my honorable wife," he said, preventing her from executing her purpose.

"You know how much I care for you. Tell me you will not meet that man alone at night again."

But she managed to wrench the door from his grasp and to close and lock it in his face.

CHAPTER XX.

“ESCAPED! THANK GOD!”

AT Brayton, Victor Hall was worried at his enforced absence from business. There were many things at Olluma that required his attention, while the affairs of the mine and the town site had always been the particular care of his partner. He learned that the profits from both these sources were growing, and saw evidence that unless something unforeseen intervened he must soon become a rich man, but he felt restive. The presence of Morse, which he learned was likely to continue indefinitely at Olluma, made him an involuntary exile. He feared that he would have to meet the man, sooner or later, in spite of all.

The news that soon came by mail of the presence of the Feltons added to his uneasiness in no small degree. He had heard nothing directly from them since the painful scene with the father in-front of his residence at Stromberg. To meet Gertrude again must, he believed, result in an unpleasant hour to both of them. He began to think seriously of taking a long trip to some other part of the State, regardless of everything. But one evening he was thunderstruck to see a party of four people drive up to the little hotel where he was staying, and to find that the situation must be met,

whether he liked it or not. In the party were Mr. and Miss Felton, Mr. Morse and Mr. Whiteley. They had come down in a trap drawn by four horses, and had evidently made quick time across the country, judging by the heated condition of the beasts.

There was nothing to be done but make the best of it, and Mr. Hall rose from his seat on the hotel veranda and lifted his hat to the visitors. The first to alight was Whiteley, who said, as if he had done the one thing on earth most delightful to his partner, "I've brought some of your old friends, Hall." Next was Mr. Morse, who offered a hesitating hand, that Victor was obliged to accept, unless he chose to attract attention by refusing it. Mr. Felton, before helping Gertrude down, grasped the palm of Mr. Hall as warmly as if they had always been on the warmest terms.

"I'm awfully glad to see you, my boy," said he. "You've not forgotten Gerty, I'm sure."

Miss Felton's eyes sought those of her one time lover with a shy glance that told him volumes. His heart began to beat more violently as she placed both of her hands in his in what seemed a perfectly artless manner.

"How well you're looking!" she remarked, and indeed he had a color that might have been ascribed to solid health, at that moment. "Papa wanted to see the mine, and thought the drive would do me good."

As soon as rooms had been engaged by the new comers and they had all retired with the exception of Whiteley, to remove the dust from their faces and

hands, Mr. Hall turned to his partner with a worried expression.

"How the devil," he asked, "did you round up that crowd? It's taken all my breath away to meet them so unexpectedly."

"Thought it would be a happy surprise," was the reply. "Morse told me he must see you, if he had to wait six months, and I've learned from Felton that he's got some nice things that you'll be glad to hear."

"What do you mean?" demanded Victor, reddening still more.

"I guess I'd better let him tell his own story. The long and short of it is, though, he feels he's used you wrongly. He practically wants to beg your pardon and ask you to let by-gones go."

Mr. Hall gasped in surprise.

"Did he tell you what passed between us, before I left Stromberg?" he said, bewildered.

"Substantially. The young lady is yours, my boy, in spite of all. You must have made a deep impression to have it last all this time, without a word, as I understand, for three years! That's what I call faithfulness and I congratulate you with all my heart."

A dizzy feeling came across Mr. Hall's brain. As his partner vanished with a bright laugh he staggered to the chair he had recently vacated and gave himself up to troubled thought. In his palms was still the impression of those little hands whose touch had once sent the deepest thrills through his veins. A long time had passed—years in which he had tried to bury those hopes of the old days.

Now the question must be reopened, if what Whiteley said was true. If Mr. Felton was really going to ask him to resume his relations with Gertrude he must decide without more ado what reply to make.

He had loved her with the full flush of his first youthful passion. The frigid way in which he had been asked to surrender his hope had changed the entire current of his life. On her account he had abandoned friends and the ties of his old home and gone into the wild West to begin an entirely new existence. By a singular combination of circumstances he had at last reached a road that would lead to pecuniary success. Was it the knowledge of this fact that persuaded the haughty millionaire to look with more favor on an alliance he had once rejected with insult? Victor did not understand what else could alter Mr. Felton's views.

As to Gertrude herself, Victor was not quite certain of his sentiments at the present day. Time works changes and he had suffered much on her account. Did he love her still, or had the experiences through which he had passed buried that most tender sentiment? He grew weak as he tried to decide this question, and, although he was not quite sure what the verdict would be, he found himself, before he was aware of it, pressing to his lips the fingers she had touched.

He had quite forgotten Morse, in the tumult that the other matter caused in his brain. When he heard his name spoken by the soft tones of that individual, who reappeared on the veranda, he felt a very disagreeable chill.

"Can I have a few minutes' conversation with you, Mr. Hall, before dinner?"

"Is it necessary?" was the not over polite reply.

"I have come two thousand miles. I shall only detain you a few minutes."

Rising slowly and unwillingly, Hall motioned to the other to follow him and ascended to his chamber on the second floor. Indicating that his companion might proceed, Victor threw himself into a chair and motioned him to another. His manner was not cordial, though he did his best to make it decent. He did not like Morse; the man knew it and any attempt to conceal the fact would have been quite apparent. It was as well to make no pretense.

"I hardly know how to begin," came the low, almost apologetic tones. "I realize that you suffered a great loss some years ago, that was caused—in a measure—through me. I feel that you have a certain animosity toward me on that account, which I wish I could convince you is entirely undeserved."

He paused, as if to give his statement an interrogative form, and Victor replied, "Quite useless," in a listless way, without looking toward him.

"I have been surprised," pursued the speaker, after a pause, "at your not drawing on Mr. Keith for the dividends, or the equivalent to what they would have been, which I have paid him, ever since the securities were stolen. He tells me he wrote you about the matter and that he presumes you received his letter. May I ask if you do know that over \$400 has been paid by

me to him for you every three months since my safe was robbed?"

"I do know," was the impatient rejoinder.

"And you have never drawn a cent of it. Why?"

Mr. Hall swung his chair around so that it would face the speaker.

"You have asked me a question," he said; "let me ask you another. We might as well understand this thing in its entirety. If you can turn over to my agent the interest and dividends on this property, why do you not hand him the bonds and stocks themselves?"

There was not a tremor in the eyelids that confronted the questioner. They were raised with the least element of surprise in them, and that was all.

"Did you understand, then, that the securities were recovered?" asked Mr. Morse. "That is an error. The man who was convicted of the theft made no confession. We could not get him, under any threat or promise of mitigation of sentence, to surrender the least part of his plunder."

Victor sprang up with every muscle on his face distended.

"A man convicted of the theft!" he repeated. "*What* man?"

"The one who had exclusive opportunity to commit it, a clerk in my office named Herbert Brown. You remember him, do you not? He was the only person who kept the combination of the safe. Do you really mean that this is news to you?"

Victor paced up and down the floor like a madman for the next few minutes, unable to utter a word.

"I never heard a word of it," he ejaculated at last, the perspiration standing on his forehead. "Convicted, did you say? And sentenced? Did you succeed in putting anybody in prison, on such flimsy evidence as that?"

"The case was clear enough. He alone had the combination and the package was taken without violence."

"He alone—except *you!*" said Hall, with undoubted meaning.

"He alone. I never had it, thinking such a secret best in the custody of one person."

Stopping before the other man, Mr. Hall shook his finger in his face.

"You know whom the people of Stromberg think took that package!" he cried. "They believe to a man that you have those papers in your possession to-day, unless you have disposed of them!"

Mr. Morse was much affected by this direct statement. He covered his face with his hands and a low groan escaped his lips.

"I know it too well," he said, when he raised his head again. "No one has ever lisp'd the thought aloud in my presence till this instant, but I have been made to feel it like the stinging lash of a whip on the bare skin. It matters not that the evidence in the court satisfied a jury and a judge that were honest and impartial; that I have tried to lead the life of an incorrupt man; that at the sacrifice of half my earnings—depleted greatly on account of this unjust accusation—I have managed to hand Mr. Keith quarterly a sum equal to

the income on what you lost. They are determined to believe me guilty and now, I find, you hold the same opinion. What can I do—*what can I do!*”

The perspiration that had streamed over Victor Hall's face came out again in renewed streams.

“There is a greater jury than any found in our court-rooms,” he said, “and it has found you guilty. We can do no good by discussing this question. Why have you come to California?”

Restoring himself by a strong effort, Morse seemed in an instant the quiet, suave business man of yore.

“I will tell you,” he said. “It is necessary, however, that you keep my communication a secret for the present. When the young man accused (we will say accused, since it pleases you better) of purloining your property from my safe, escaped from his prison—”

“Escaped!” cried Hall, startled. Then he muttered something that sounded like “Thank God!”

“Yes, he escaped some months ago and has not since been apprehended, though the detectives think they have traced him and expect to apprehend him soon.”

“How long was his sentence?”

“Five years.”

“And how long had he served?”

“Between two and three.”

“For the love of Heaven! Is not that enough. Only a bloodhound would want to drag the man back after such punishment, and with no direct evidence against him, either.”

Morse lifted his hands deprecatingly.

"It is not further punishment that is wanted. We believe that, rather than undergo the rest of his term, with the additional penalty for running away, Brown will own up to the place of concealment in which he has put your property. If he does I, for one, would be willing to make his sentence as light as possible. I am not vindictive. I only wish to see you righted."

He talked as if he were really innocent and Mr. Hall was speechless for some time.

"That property was mine," he said, finally. "I am going to be rich enough without it, and I won't have the young fellow punished further for a crime he may or may not have committed. I shall communicate at once with Mr. Keith and bid him use every effort to secure a pardon."

"Excuse me," was the reply, delivered in a mechanical tone. "The property at the time it was stolen was *not* yours; it was *mine*, in my capacity of trustee. You had no more concern in it, according to law, than the man who stole it. To put myself right before the court I must find those bonds and, when you are thirty years of age, turn them over to you. If I am unable to do that I shall take my own property, small as it is, and put that into the scale, to the last farthing. If Brown has not already made way with the securities and spent the proceeds, it is my duty—to myself, to you and to your deceased mother—to put every legal pressure on him to compel restitution."

"You came here to tell me this, did you?" asked Victor impatiently.

"Partly; and partly because Brown has been seen

in Southern California, where it is said he has relations. If I can locate him here I shall hope for something tangible in your behalf. He will do anything, I think, rather than go back to his cell."

The dinner bell interrupted the conversation, for which Hall was thankful. He dismissed his caller, and after making himself more presentable, descended to the dining room, where the Feltons were already seated at his table.

CHAPTER XXI.

MR. GARDNER GOES TOO FAR.

LEARNING that Mr. Morse had gone to Brayton, "Herbert Brown," who was known at Whiteley & Hall's by still another name—that of Mason Harvey—returned to his work at the law office. He thought he had best be there as much as he dared, lest his employers should think it necessary to engage some one in his place; and when Mr. Whiteley sent to inquire if he could not come in during his absence, even if he did not do much work, he replied that he would do what he could and at least keep the place open. The situation was one he coveted much, as it enabled him to earn a living and at the same time reside near Marian, with whom he wanted to keep in close touch. Late at night, when the others of the family were asleep, he could tap on her window and be admitted for a conference, without attracting attention in the darkened street from the passers that were very few and far between.

Paul learned from his sister the fullest particulars of her visit to Illinois, but as she did not know that her movements had been watched by the suspicious officers of the law, she was not able to convey any warning of this fact to him. He was principally interested in the effort she had made to induce clemency on the part of

Richard Morse, and her failure to secure any promise in this direction, unless preceded by a surrender of the stolen bonds, which he still claimed to believe Paul had taken.

"If only we could find who *did* steal those bonds," she said to him, one night when he was on a late visit to her house, "how easy our course would be! Have you thought of everything possible in that direction? Are you *sure* no one had the combination of the safe but you, and that the package was inside on the very day before it was missed?"

"All I can say is," Paul replied, "that I used a combination that I invented and never divulged to any person. As to the package, I don't know when the false one was substituted for the true. On the outside they looked very much alike. I saw a package which seemed to me the same, day after day, whenever I opened the safe; and when Mr. Morse came into the room with a lot of blank papers in his hand and said that he had found them instead of the securities, I was too dumfounded to know what to think. He was pale and trembling. Together we took every scrap out of the safe and examined them with care. When it was clear there was nothing of the kind inside, we looked at each other. I had never thought of him, but the suspicion came into my mind, I think, at just the moment he began to accuse me. '*You know where those bonds are!*' he cried, savagely. '*Give them up at once or I will send for the police!*'"

"You could have knocked me down with a feather, Mannie. 'I guess you can tell better than any one else

where they are!’ I retorted, as soon as I could catch my breath. And then I said some things that wouldn’t sound well to repeat, being overtaken with one of my old fits of temper. I told him that nobody in Stromberg thought him an honest man, that people had been hinting for months that he would find some way to cheat Mr. Hall out of his inheritance. I know it wasn’t nice to say such things, dear, but when a fellow is called a thief, he’s not responsible.

“He said nothing more then, but a week later we had it again. Infuriated he backed against the door and told Willie Hayward to run for an officer. Poor Willie looked at me, as if he didn’t know what to do, but I told him to go; that it would be all right. When the policeman came and Mr. Morse said he wanted me arrested I never answered a word. I had had time, Mannie, to think of you—I could only be locked up a few hours, I believed, and I might as well make the best of it. I never dreamed that I would be taken into court and arraigned for theft, least of all that I could be convicted, with no evidence against me, and I didn’t want to carry things too far, when I remembered what happened before and what obligations we were under to him.”

The sister listened with anxious eyes, clasping the hands of the speaker in her own.

“Poor, poor Paul!” she said, “how brave and true you were; and I believed you guilty! Can you ever forgive me? You wrote me not to come to you—that there was no danger of your conviction—and I thought as you did. But, my brother, there is one thing I wish

you could banish from your mind, hard as it may be. I know Mr. Morse so well, it is just as incredible to me that he could have done this act as that I could have done it myself. It is because he is thoroughly convinced he is right that my tears and prayers have no effect upon him. Since he came to Olluma he has called here on two evenings, and we have talked the whole matter over from every point of view. He has paid a sum equal to the dividends the bonds used to bring, quarterly, to Mr. Keith, out of his own pocket. His business has fallen off greatly on account of the feeling against him, and he has had to pinch in many ways to do this, but he insists that he must make what restitution he can. It is not revenge on you that he seeks, now, nor to get back what he himself has lost, but the rehabilitation of his honor in the community. Oh, Paul, I wish you could believe him innocent!"

He put his arm around her waist like a lover and kissed her tenderly on the cheek.

"You don't want me to lie to you, Mannie. I can't believe it; I only wish I could. Either he stole that property or I did. Will nothing suffice him but to pursue me into my grave? for I feel that this continuous watching for men who hunt escaped criminals will be my death. If he has no mercy for me, has he none for you and poor little Elsie? I'm doing all I can to be patient, but if they try to take me back I don't know what will happen. There is an end to my endurance somewhere, and they may find it."

The brother's lips blanched and specks of blood appeared in the pupils of his dark eyes. At the same in-

stant a stealthy noise alarmed both him and Marian, and they looked at each other in alarm. Presently the knob of the door that led into the hallway was softly turned, but the key had been used in the lock and the intruder could not enter.

"Are you there, Marian?" asked the shaking voice of Mr. Gardner.

Motioning Paul to hide behind the sofa, which he instantly did, the girl replied in the affirmative.

"Who is with you?"

"I am alone, father. What do you want?"

"I want something to make me sleep. I thought I heard some one talking."

She went at once to unlock the door and to assure the intruder that he was mistaken. She had been reading, she said, and perhaps had unconsciously pronounced the words aloud. If he would come back up stairs she would see what she could find for him.

It was plain even to the muddled perceptions of the father that something had occurred to unbalance the nerves of the young woman; he was also sure that her story about reading aloud was a prevarication. He took her by the arm so roughly that, if she had not had Paul's safety at stake, and known that the slightest outcry would have brought him to her side, she must have uttered a scream.

"Yer lyin'! Who was a-talkin' here with yer an' the door locked?"

"I didn't want to tell you, father, for I know you won't approve of it, but I had to see him somewhere

and I let him in for a little while. He's gone now, though, and I won't have him come again."

He leered at her with heavy eyes.

"Morse, eh? Well, did he leave yer any money?"

"Father—don't! Let me go and find your medicine. I think there is some whiskey in a bottle in my room. You must go back to sleep. You don't look well. Come, dear."

"Find the whiskey an' I'll come. It's some yer stole out o' my room, ain't it? A nice lot o' children I've brung up. Thieves, the whole of 'em. An' yer still refusin' to take his money, are yer? The more fool you. Ef yer don't want it yerself, yer might remember others what's sick an' gittin' old an' suff'rin fer the comforts o' life. He's at the hotel, though, an' I'm goin' to see him in the mornin' an' ask him to do somethin' fer me."

Marian turned on her father a look that he had never seen in her face before. It quelled him and he shrank like a whipped cur before her.

"If you dare!" she said, with terrible meaning. "Father, I've borne a great deal from you, but—speak one word of that kind to Mr. Morse and——"

Her voice choked. She could not go on. A flood of tears stopped her utterance. Mumbling that there was nothing to blubber about and that she'd better get the whiskey, Gardner shambled from the room. She followed him up the stairs, found the liquor, which she had obtained in the way he suggested, and gave it to him. Then, after waiting long enough to feel sure he

was in a drunken sleep, she went back to the parlor and rejoined her brother.

It was late, and merely repeating that he must not think of coming to the house again, and that she would send Jakey every day or two to communicate with him, Marian parted with Paul, and saw him disappear into the darkness.

It was a heavy burden Marian Gardner was carrying. With no mother to advise her, she had this awful incubus of a remaining parent, lost to all sense of paternal duty or affection; a brother, maligned, persecuted, punished for a sin he had never committed, dearer than ever through it all; and now there was something else to cause her anxiety, the suffering through which her younger sister was passing.

"I didn't know you really loved him so, Elsie," she said, the next morning, when she took the light breakfast to the bedside and saw the white face turn away from the food. "He has been a friend to us all, and I supposed you liked him the same as I do, but I never thought of this."

"I didn't know it, either, Mannie. When that rich young lady began to talk of his going back to the town where she lives—when she showed me the ring he gave her—it all came over me like a weight that crushed. But I'm going to get over it, sister, and he must never know anything about it. Isn't there somewhere I can go before he returns, so I won't have to see him till I'm stronger? I wouldn't for the world have him suspect."

"Sweet little sister! How I love you!"

A shuffling step outside the door put an end to the conversation for the time, and Marian went about her duties elsewhere, thinking of the suggestion Elsie had made, about going out of town for a little time. That would undoubtedly be the best thing, if she could arrange it. After long thought she turned to the only one outside the family on whom she could rely and wrote about the matter to Mr. Sewall:

My Dear Friend:—Do you know of any quiet family near Brayton where Elsie could go to board, at a reasonable rate, for a few weeks? I have thought of that town because you would be there to see her frequently, and that would keep her from being lonely. I cannot put the reasons for this step on paper, but if you should find the sort of home I mean, perhaps you would drive up here and talk it over with me.

I know the last time we met there was a slight difference between us, but I hope you have forgotten that. At any rate, my sister is your legal ward and I think you have a duty to perform in her case.

MARIAN.

Mr. Sewall, who had worried over the incident to which Marian alluded, was much relieved to receive this letter, which showed that she held no feeling against him for his interference in her affairs. He wondered what she could mean, however, in her allusion to Elsie, and lost no time in seeing to the errand with which she had charged him. A family suited in all respect occurred to him at once and within an hour he had persuaded them to receive his young friend as a guest. After lunch he sent to the hotel stable for a team, intending to set out for Olluma immediately.

"There's a gentleman here who'd like to ride to town with you, if you've no objection," said the landlord, coming down the steps to meet him.

"Tell him I shall be delighted," was the reply.

But a minute later the minister began to doubt this; for the passenger he had agreed to carry was none other than Richard Morse of Stromberg.

CHAPTER XXII.

OSCAR FELTON TAKES BACK WATER.

MR. OSCAR FELTON prided himself on his reputation as a "business man." By that I mean that he had a high opinion of himself as one who generally accomplished whatever he set out to do. More than once he had wrenched success from the very jaws of failure, in matters financial. He was not over scrupulous in his methods, believing that business concerns justified almost anything in the race for supremacy. When he started out to secure his daughter the husband he had once rejected he carried into the scheme the methods of his counting room. He loved his child, and he had become convinced that her happiness—perhaps her life itself—depended on her marriage with Victor Hall.

In the first talks that he had with the young attorney at Brayton he proceeded with care. In the first place he expected to admit the injustice he had done him the night they met on the walk in front of the rich man's Stromberg residence. He was willing to abase himself as much as might be necessary to accomplish his ends. He had also a full understanding with his daughter as to the role she was to play. They were both to use their utmost efforts to bring back the old status quo, and

anything or anybody that stood in the way was to be sacrificed without mercy.

"I trust you won't think me a flatterer if I say that your conduct in that unfortunate affair merits my highest commendation," he said to Victor, after Gertrude had retired to her room on the evening of their arrival at Brayton. They had dined together, in company with Mr. Whiteley and all reference to the past had been carefully avoided at the table. "I did what at the time I thought right, but in less than a week I saw my error. You had then left town and my repentance came too late. I learned by the wasting cheek of my dear girl, by her silent yet reproachful attitude toward me, how wrong it was for any consideration of a worldly nature to come between young and loving hearts. Could I have reached you, in person or by letter, I would have begged your pardon and invited you to make yourself wholly at home in my house. I did my best to locate you, but no one seemed to know where you had gone. It was a terrible experience, Mr. Hall. When I accidentally discovered your whereabouts, through the loan I made your partner, I resolved to lose no time in letting you know how I regretted my error and how anxious I was that its effects might be obliterated."

Mr. Hall listened with wonder to this statement. It was quite different from anything he would have expected from the haughty millionaire. He could not help being affected by the paternal interest that prompted it, and in the first flush of his surprise he assured Mr. Felton that he appreciated his position per-

fectly and begged he would not think it necessary to apologize further.

"I left Stromberg, as you can imagine," said he, "under a severe pressure of mental distress. I had a very warm feeling toward your daughter and had come to realize, with deep sorrow, that in my financial condition I could not hope to win your consent to our union. Sometimes I think my brain was affected by my disappointments. Then, when I had hardly time to recover a little from that, I learned that my small fortune had gone with the rest. I must admit that I had had some doubts of the perfect probity of the trustee—doubts shared I think by many others who knew him; but when the blow came, in addition to the one I received from you, I saw the necessity of putting the past out of my mind and beginning an entirely new life. The hard work this compelled has been in a measure my salvation, for it has kept me too busy to allow much time for repining. As you can see, I am now, apparently, on the road to a competence, and whether the whole property is ever found or not I shall achieve in time a respectable financial position."

To this Mr. Felton listened with great politeness. He assured the speaker that no one of his friends could rejoice more at his altered prospects than he, but he added that it made not the slightest difference in his personal sentiments toward him. A high character and honorable aspirations were the best recommendations for a young man; if he had cherished other ideas he had long since abandoned them. The conversation, which lasted for several hours, closed with the hope

expressed by Mr. Felton that all by-gones would be forgotten, and that Mr. Hall would resume his old relations with his family.

"I have no higher wish than to see you young people make each other happy," he said, with emotion. "As far as wealth is concerned, I have enough for both, more than enough, in fact. I am growing old and cannot long be here to cherish and advise my child. My dearest wish is to see her happiness secured, and I know it lies in only one direction."

It did not impress Mr. Hall as strongly as it may the reader that Mr. Felton was practically "throwing his daughter at the head" of the listener. He took the statements of the gentleman for what they seemed—a plain acknowledgment of errors long since regretted and repented. He was affected by the parental affection shown. More than this, the touch of a slender hand still vibrated in his youthful nerves. He had not outgrown the sentiments of four years ago, for the pretty and now fragile daughter of the Stromberg millionaire.

The two men parted at bedtime with mutual expressions of good will, and Mr. Felton, according to his promise, went straight to Gertrude's room to tell her with elation that everything appeared to be progressing finely. The girl listened anxiously to every word and retired to bed with rose colored visions of a happy future.

Mr. Whiteley, influenced by a desire to please a great capitalist, became a willing assistant to Mr. Felton in everything that was asked of him. His task it was to eradicate any idea that might have found lodgment in

Mr. Hall's mind of an alliance with the little girl at the Gardners. He was a lawyer of considerable astuteness, and did not need instruction as to the best way of influencing a jury. He went about the work of undermining the Gardner family in his partner's estimation as deliberately as if it was an honorable act. He had Mr. Felton's theory that success justified any method, and he could not see how a marriage with a very rich man's daughter could be other than advantageous, both to Mr. Hall and to the firm of which he was the junior member.

At the mine, the next day, when alone with Victor, he began, in a roundabout fashion, to feel his way.

"I think the Gardners have never regretted selling this old ranch," he said. "It's a pity the father is in such a condition—unable to do anything for his family through constant use of stimulants. He had one of the finest wives in the world, I've heard people say."

"She was a lovely character," said Hall, musingly. "A great loss to her girls, I can assure you."

"They've had more than their share of trouble," pursued the wily advocate. "You know about the brother, of course, Paul, I think was his name. When less than 16 he was sentenced to a State institution for stabbing a man with a knife, and no one knows what became of him afterwards. Somehow these things run in families, like a taint in the blood."

He then went on to talk about the mine and for some minutes made no reference to the subject which had interested Mr. Hall greatly. He wondered how White-

ley had learned so much on a matter of which he had only the obscure hints of little Jacob.

"Speaking of the Gardners," he said, when a chance came to reintroduce the subject, "how different the young ladies are from their father. Pedigree doesn't count for much with the human race, or else girls take their characteristics entirely from the mother's side."

"Y-e-s," was the doubtful response. "And yet you know, I suppose, that there is a strange mystery connected with the elder one. I don't like to talk about such things on mere rumor, but it is said she disappeared for several years and conceals her whereabouts during that time when questioned on the matter. There was a rumor that an Eastern man was here paying her attention and that when her people objected to him they went off about the same time, but I never take stock in such insinuations without more proof. The worst thing about it is the effect it's sure to have on her sister's prospects. She's a girl of whom everybody speaks in the highest terms, and the history of her family will be a dreadful stumbling block in her way, one of these days, when she gets old enough to marry. Yes, Bill, I'll be there in a minute."

There is a story of a lawyer who once addressed a jury somewhat in this fashion: "I will not allude, gentlemen, to the fact that the defendant murdered his aged father in cold blood and brought the hairs of his mother in sorrow to the grave; the learned judge would not allow me to touch on those painful incidents in his career. I will confine myself entirely to the evidence you have heard about the watermelon."

Had Whiteley used a different tone, acting as if he wished to cast aspersions upon the elder Miss Gardner, Victor Hall would certainly have risen to her defence from innate chivalry and friendship. As it was, the only effect was the one intended, to connect the disagreeable history of the other members with poor little Elsie. He liked the child immensely, though no definite idea of marriage had ever entered his mind in connection with her. He found himself entertaining the view suggested, and he pitied the girl from the bottom of his heart. His greatest hope was that these things were not known to her in their full enormity and that she might be kept from ever hearing of them.

At the same time he mused much over his altered relations with the Feltons and could not quite make up his mind what he ought to do—what he wanted to do—in the new circumstances. Having driven matrimony out of his mind with a violent effort, four years ago, the thought of becoming a benedict, even with his old sweetheart for a partner in connubial bliss, was something that bred in his mind a certain uneasiness. He felt, without exactly realizing it, that he was being pushed toward a decision, and resented in a vague way the attitude in which he was placed. And he was a good deal troubled also over the revelations of Mr. Morse. It seemed as if the case of Herbert Brown, the convicted clerk, ought to command his attention before anything else.

When he met Gertrude he tried to assume toward her an air of friendship, without committing himself further. This was not so easy as he had imagined it

might be. They had been very fond of each other in the old days and she evidently thought their renewed acquaintance had fully established their former terms. Whenever they were alone together—which seemed to be very often—her conversation was based on the old lines. She extended her hand to him, timidly and yet confidently, and held his own with a clasp that spoke volumes of the state of her palpitating heart.

She was so utterly happy in his society that he could not enter seriously on a discussion of the situation. She talked much of papa's sorrow at what he had done, and mentioned incidentally two or three offers of marriage she had rejected from men of high position and large wealth, one of them an Austrian baron of old family. He began to feel that her love had meant more than his, even when he thought the loss of his darling would break his heart.

But he went on, for the week he remained at the Brayton House, meeting her often, talking of the old times, taking an occasional drive with her, and letting her assume that everything was all right between them, not knowing just what his intentions were or what he ought to say. It is much easier to float with the tide than to propel one's boat against it. When he felt that he could no longer remain away from his office without doing injustice to important business there—and when he supposed that Richard Morse intended to spend a while longer at Brayton, or return East (having apparently no special reason for staying in California), he bade a good-by to the Feltons with as little ceremony as was consistent with politeness. He kissed Gertrude in her father's presence, when she offered him her lips

as if it were a matter of course, and said in the usual way that he would be glad to see them whenever they came back to Olluma.

"I hope Harvey won't get sick again," said Whiteley to him, standing at the carriage wheel. "He's a bright young fellow and I don't want to have to hunt up another clerk. I think you'd best give him the combination to the safe, as we're both liable to be off at the same time. If I'm any judge of human nature he's all right."

"I don't believe in throwing temptation in the way of a ten dollar a week clerk," replied Hall. "We might get another safe and put such things in it as he would need to get at, but where the cash is I'd rather keep the combination myself."

"All right," said Whiteley. "Order one, will you? Perhaps that's the best way. We have five or ten thousand dollars some nights to leave in the office. Yes, I guess that's safest."

Mr. Hall drove a pretty good team, which was one of the extravagancies he had of late indulged in, and after he had gone ten miles or so he saw that he was overtaking another pair of horses going in the same direction. Coming closer, gradually, he recognized, first Mr. Sewall, and then his travelling companion. He would have been glad to stop and talk with the minister, but he did not like to say much to Morse, so he touched his animals with a whip and passed them rapidly.

"I've got an important engagement at Olluma," he explained, as he waved his hand to Mr. Sewall and left them in the dust from his flying wheels.

CHAPTER XXIII.

“ I REFUSE TO BE DRIVEN ! ”

THE present technical head of the Gardner family smoked his black pipe in his usual discontent, on the back piazza of his town residence. Not only was he recovering slowly from a prolonged “booze” but, what was harder to bear, the prospect of starting on another was not as good as he could have desired. With Mr. Hall out of town there was no one to apply to for the necessary funds. Marian, who held the slender purse-strings of the family, had been less liberal to him than ever since the night when he said those insulting things in the hearing of her hidden brother. The saloon-keepers of the village had adopted a cash basis, so far as he was concerned, and all his pleadings for “jest one pint,” which he solemnly promised to pay for at an early date, failed to move their hard hearts. He could think of nothing in the way of jewelry which he could pawn, a careful lock being kept on the few trinkets that belonged to his daughters and his own timepiece and chain having been sacrificed at a time long distant.

He was very thirsty. The hard-heartedness of this world struck him as it had often done before with a sickening chill. Had the Evil One been around (as he used to be) with a manuscript deed of his soul ready

to exchange for a good drink of whiskey, Gardner would not have hesitated to close the bargain on the spot. It may perhaps be proper to add in this connection that, unless souls were at a premium in Sheol that day, His Satanic Majesty would have lost heavily by giving even this price for such a diminutive one as Mr. Gardner had to offer.

"Oh, for one little drink!" he moaned. "I wonder if Mr. Hall is coming back this week."

The easiest way to get information on that subject was to go over to Whiteley & Hall's law offices and inquire. Poising himself unsteadily on his feet, Gardner laid down his pipe and began the painful task. His head throbbed, his throat burned, his legs wobbled. Several times on the way he sat down to rest on some convenient curb, where he excited the pity of some, the derision of others and the disgust of all who saw him. After a long time, however, he managed to reach his destination and shambled slowly up the stairs. There was no one in the front office, but a door that led to one of those in the rear was partly open and in response to a light cough a young man came to the entrance.

"Has Mis'r Hall got back f'm Brayt'n (hic)?" said Gardner.

"No, sir," replied the young man, turning his face into the shadow.

"Do y'know when he's (hic) comin'?"

"Probably next week."

The inquirer staggered toward his informant and pushed the door aside. There was no use in trying to

hide further, and Paul (for it was he) decided that he must face it out. The full beard he had grown had sufficed to disguise him from others, perhaps it would from this man.

"Washername?" asked Gardner, staring hard at his son.

"Mason Harvey, sir."

"Ever see me afore?"

"No, sir."

"Well, my name's Gardner—'Rius Gardner. Mr. Hall's got charge of some prop'ty (hic) of mine an' whenever I want any money I git it. Can't yer 'vance me four bits till he comes? 'S all right, young feller, give yer m'word."

A fifty cent piece was instantly put into the outstretched palm and with expressions of broken thanks Gardner lost no time in leaving the place, to Paul's relief. He was afraid it was wrong to pander to his father's taste for liquor, which he knew was his object in asking the loan, but greater interests were at stake. The way in which the applicant had stared at his face was little less than alarming. On thinking of it at leisure, however, Paul ascribed the intensity of the look to his father's condition and congratulated himself once more on escaping recognition.

Just before closing that evening, without having sent any warning of his intention to return, Mr. Hall sprang briskly up the steps of his office. The clerk put down his hat, which he had on, and for more than an hour devoted himself to matters of business. There was much to say, a great deal of mail to open, and several

letters to write in answer to dictation. When this was finished it was past seven o'clock.

"I'm going to tell Whiteley I think we should raise your salary a little," said Mr. Hall, with a gratified air, as he prepared to leave. "If he takes my advice you will begin to draw \$15 a week, after this month."

"You are very kind, sir."

"And—by the way—I mustn't forget to write to Mosler to-morrow for a new safe. We need another one, as this is getting overcrowded. Do you know anything about opening a safe with a combination?"

With one gasp of surprise at the question, coming from him, Paul managed to answer that he thought he could easily learn.

"Yes, it won't take you an hour. I'm going to give you one safe to have the combination of yourself, while I keep the other. In case you took a notion (ha! ha!) to run off, we want something left to continue business with. Well, good-night, Harvey."

At the door, however, a man was about to enter; did enter, in fact, as it was opened. It was Richard Morse. Not knowing how to avoid him, except by a direct discourtesy, Mr. Hall stepped back; and the clerk, pale from his construction of the latest words of his employer, met Morse face to face as he walked out.

"I just called to see if any letters had possibly got sent to me in your care," said Mr. Morse, deferentially. "None? Thank you. Who was the young man I met—your clerk, I presume? Yes. Thank you again. You are very kind. I would like a few words with

you, but I fear this is an inopportune time. You have not had dinner, have you?"

"I have not, but if I had, Mr. Morse, I don't see what reason there could be for any more interviews between us."

"I do not wish to annoy you. I can wait till you have leisure."

Mr. Hall chafed at the very presence of the man.

"If you must say anything to me—say it. And, as the proclamations say, 'forever after hold your peace.'"

Morse, who was always sallow, had no color at all in his face now. He made a movement as if to take a chair and then, seeing that no very cordial look encouraged him, braced up again.

"I only wished to tell you," he said, uneasily, "that I have strong hopes of getting possession soon of your property."

"In other words you think you have carried out the farce of pretending it was stolen as long as you care to?"

The man winced palpably under the sarcasm.

"You are cruelly unjust," he said, swallowing something that stuck in his throat. "My business honor is at stake. I shall never rest until it is cleared up so that even you will admit that you have done me a grievous wrong. Cannot you dismiss your bitterness, and listen for a few minutes to a very serious statement I think you ought to hear?"

With a sigh of impatience Victor took a seat and made a slight motion to his companion to take another.

"Just remember that I've had nothing to eat since noon," said he.

"I am willing to come to-morrow," said Morse, half rising from the seat he had barely taken.

"For God's sake! finish your errand. If you've got anything to say to me, begin."

"It is this, then, Mr. Hall, and I pray you have patience: Do you know who the clerk was who took (who was convicted of taking, if you prefer that) your securities that disappeared from my office?"

"No, I don't and I don't care! All I ever heard about him was what you told me yourself."

"Well, I think you ought to know. He called himself Herbert Brown, but that was a name assumed when he left a reform school several years before, where he had been confined for an assault with a dangerous weapon. His real name was (don't blame me, sir!) Paul Gardner, son of Darius Gardner of this town."

The listener did not care to drive his informant from the office now. He was quite ready to hear all he had to say.

"There is a mystery here," he cried, much excited, "which I must ask you to explain. How could you employ a clerk that you knew had already done time for a criminal offence? and not only employ him, but make him sole custodian of the combination of a safe in which you kept your clients' valuables?"

"I believed he had fully reformed and I wanted to give him an opportunity to redeem himself."

"You mean that you wanted some one with a previously bad reputation to lay your own rascality on!"

Tears—actual tears—came down the pale cheeks of the other man.

"I can say no more to you," he stammered, brokenly. "You give me no credit for any honorable sentiment."

He rose and went with tottering steps toward the door and the lawyer's voice followed him: "Don't I credit you with as much honesty as other people do?"

"That's the worst of it," he said, turning. "You're all bound to drive me to the wall. Well, I refuse to be driven!" He raised his head with an air that was slightly majestic. "I will prove my innocence—I never had any doubt I should some day do that—but I will try no more to save others who stand before the car of justice. What you have said to-night alters all my plans. Hereafter I shall think of myself alone—of my ruined reputation, my crushed hopes, my destroyed business prospects! The world has been cruel and heartless to me—I will be heartless and cruel to the world! I will drag Paul Gardner back to his prison and force from him the hiding place of his plunder, and woe to those in my way!"

Mr. Hall heard this outburst with all imaginable surprise and when the office door crashed loudly behind the speaker, he got up and paced the floor in great uneasiness. There had been too much realism in the action of his caller to doubt that he meant to do his worst against the absconding clerk. And he was Elsie Gardner's brother! Lord, Lord! Was there anything in all the range of fiction as strange as that?

He went to the hotel and sat down to the late table alone, but there was little on the bill of fare that appealed to his appetite. The interview with Morse had disturbed him in every fibre.

"I'll go to Marian," he said, after a long debate with himself. "If what he told is true she needs a friend and I will be one to her. Dick Morse is in a rage that won't down easily and he shan't have a weak girl to fight alone. I'm in a condition, financially and otherwise, to help that brother, and I'll offer my services in any way that seems advisable. If we're going to have a war I may as well begin getting my ammunition. Confound him, I wish he'd go back to Stromberg, or to the devil! I shan't enjoy life again till I know he's out of this vicinity. 'Woe to those in my way,' eh? Well, the man that gets in *my* way may find his share of woe, too."

He could not wait till morning and though it was rather late he walked to the Gardner cottage and rapped on the front door.

CHAPTER XXIV.

UNCONTROLLABLE IMPULSE ?

As soon as he could finish an early dinner, Mr. Sewall went to see Marian. He was glad enough to meet her on friendly terms, for their encounter on the night he took her to task for entertaining Mr. Morse so late had left him with anything but agreeable feelings. He had also learned many things during his drive with the Stromberg insurance man, on that same afternoon, and he wanted to show by his presence and his manner—if in no more definite way—that he regretted extremely the course he had inconsiderately taken.

When she came to the door to admit him he could not help saying, "Do you forgive me?" And when he received her reply in a simple and whole-souled "Yes," they were both satisfied to make no further allusion to the unpleasant circumstance. Their talk changed immediately to Elsie; and Marian told him her reasons for wanting him to take temporary charge of the sister. He listened gravely till she had finished and then said he had already secured the home she would require and would take her there on the following day, if she was ready.

This being settled, the conversation naturally re-

verted to Paul. No danger to him threatened, so far as Marian knew. He had met not only his younger sister, but his father, with no apparent suspicion of his identity in the minds of either. The bold step he had taken, of bearding the lion in his very den, though not approved by her at first, seemed justified by results. As "Mason Harvey," clerking in the office of one of the men he would naturally avoid, Marian thought Paul might be safer than among strangers. The thing that troubled her most was his reiterated assertion that in no circumstances would he be taken back to prison. If his whereabouts were discovered, she feared something dreadful would happen.

Elsie had been up during a part of the day, but had retired early, needing all the strength she could get. She was quietly determined not to give way to her sorrow, and never to let Mr. Hall know how much she cared for him. The picture Marian drew of the "child," as they always called her, was striking and pathetic. She related the history of Miss Felton's visits and the revelation of the engagement between her and Mr. Hall, that had crushed the delicate flower on its stem. Mr. Sewall listened intently and when she finished asked how much she thought Mr. Hall was to blame in the matter.

"I don't think he is to blame at all," replied Marian. "Elsie admits that no word that could be construed into the expression of a lover has ever passed his lips to her. He has acted merely like a good friend, like a faithful brother, to both of us. I know he likes Elsie very much indeed, but no one can blame him for that.

It probably never occurred to him that she would misconstrue his attentions. I'm sure it never occurred to me. I have seen them together day after day without such a thought seriously entering my head. Elsie is growing a little older, of course, but to me she is still so young that the idea of matrimony can hardly be comprehended in connection with her."

"I had a companion on my ride here from Brayton to-day," he said. "Mr. Morse."

She started in surprise at the statement and then reddened.

"I got from him what he says is generally known at Stromberg, about the former relations of Mr. Hall with that young lady. It is current gossip there that they had planned their future without the aid of Mr. Felton, and that when Mr. Hall lost his inheritance his chance of securing the father's consent was despaired of. They say also that Miss Gertrude suffered severely from the blow, and that all efforts to induce her to accept the attentions of other gentlemen have failed. Mr. Whiteley told me yesterday that since they came West things have been rearranged, however, and that an early marriage between them may now be looked for."

Marian sighed. If she had had any lingering hope that Elsie's love might yet be returned this dashed it to the ground.

"You will assume charge of her till she is quite recovered?" she said. "In your hands I know she will be safe. It is such a blessing to have a friend like you to call on."

"If she were my sister, dear Marian," he said, "I could not more gladly render her this service."

She hesitated at the next question.

"Did Mr. Morse say anything else—in relation to us? He is usually very uncommunicative."

"Nothing that I would like to talk about just now. I think I secured his confidence, which may be of use to some of you in the future. Do you know when he intends to go home?"

She shook her head.

"Not very soon, I am afraid. I wish some one would convince him that Paul did not take those papers. As long as he believes he did we shall always have him to fear."

He bowed, and both were silent under the spell of this thought for some moments.

"I have a theory of my own," he said at last, "as to what became of the bonds. It is only a theory, but I am going to work on it, in the hope that something will develop. Recent events have made it possible for me to take certain steps that I would have shrunk from earlier. We all admit that if the stolen property could be recovered the incentive to pursue your brother would be removed. It is a great task—one naturally quite out of my line—but I am going to try."

Marian begged him to be careful. She wanted no more innocent people accused. Nothing but the most absolute proof could justify the bringing in of other names. This Mr. Sewall promised and, seeing by his watch that it was nearly eight o'clock, said he would take his leave, returning at an early hour in the morn-

ing for his passenger, whom Marian promised to have ready for her ride.

Before he could go, Mr. Hall came; and when he found Mr. Sewall there, begged him to remain a few minutes longer. They were all equally interested in one matter. He then related the particulars of Mr. Morse's visit to his office, an hour before, repeating the assertion of the latter that Paul Gardner was in California and that he would never rest till he had him again in custody.

"You knew, then, it was my poor brother!" cried Marian, beginning to weep.

"Not till he told me. I was thunderstruck at the news. It seemed my first duty to warn you. If you have any way of communicating with him, urge him to leave the State at once. Whether he be innocent or guilty of the crime charged, he has suffered enough. I will do anything you suggest to aid him; both from my high regard for his—his two sisters, and because I think he is being persecuted outrageously. By-the-way, where is Elsie?"

Averting her face, Marian replied that her sister had retired early with a headache. She then asked, desiring to keep the conversation in its original channel, if Mr. Morse had given any other intimation of Paul's whereabouts than to say he was in the State.

No, he had not. And even this might be based on guess. The only thing certain was that he was bound to track him down, and had tried to get Mr. Hall's help.

"Confound those bonds!" exclaimed Victor. "I

wish I'd never heard of them. They've made me all the trouble I ever had, I think. My business is doing well and I've no need of the property, even if it is recovered. Should it be returned to me at the cost of suffering to any member of your family, Miss Gardner, I would feel like refusing to accept it."

The minister looked at the last speaker and said in a pointed way, "What is your honest opinion, Mr. Hall, about the disappearance of those securities?"

Victor wiped away the perspiration that his excitement had caused to cover his face.

"I never had but one, and that's as likely to be wrong as not. Nobody trusted Richard Morse, that I ever knew, except my misguided mother. People began to tell me as soon as he took possession that I never would get what belonged to me. I don't think you can find a man, woman or child in Stromberg who has any doubt he knows where the property is."

The minister's steady gaze had never left the other's countenance.

"And you can suggest no other probability?" he asked, quietly.

"Oh, there may be a hundred. Perhaps the safe opened itself and the package flew out of the locked windows. I say again, it has been a curse to everybody concerned. I am the loser and it ought to be enough to Morse that I refuse to aid him in driving a young man to the wall, whether he has or has not been guilty of the error."

A murmur that she should never forget these kind

words came from the trembling lips of Marian. But the minister's set face was still turned toward Mr. Hall.

"I don't like to injure your feelings," said he, after a most impressive pause, "but there was a man who, according to his own admission, had those bonds in his hands within forty-eight hours of the time they were last seen by any one we know. Have you thought of him?"

For a second Victor's brows knotted in a puzzled way and then he burst into a nervous laugh at the very absurdity of the idea.

"Keith? Ridiculous! I don't think you would make a very good detective, Mr. Sewall. But you have some excuse in the fact that you don't know the man. Why, he's trusted with fifty times the amount I lost, and his reputation is clear as the skies. Besides, he's the dearest friend—the dearest masculine friend—I have on earth. Keith? Well, well! Is nobody going to be safe in this cursed affair!"

Mr. Sewall did not join in the laugh, nor even relax the muscles of his set countenance in the slightest degree.

"Have you never heard of such a thing as 'uncontrollable impulse?' " he asked.

"Pshaw! I can't discuss it seriously. My errand is done and I must go. An awful pile of work has accumulated, with both Whiteley and myself away, and part of the time that new clerk of ours has been out sick. He is a bright fellow, by the way, that Harvey. I'm going to get his pay raised as soon as the senior re-

turns. There's a chap you could trust, now. You can see honesty shining in every lineament of his face. Give my condolences to Elsie when she wakes and tell her to run over to the office if she has time to-morrow. We must take care of our girl, Marian. What a sweet little thing she is!"

Mr. Sewall was going also and they took their leave together. The minister tried to renew the talk about the theft, but Victor declared that he should not sleep a wink if it was reopened. It fairly gave him the jim-jams, he said. He had come two thousand miles, four years ago, to get out of sight and sound of a set of mosquitoes who kept buzzing in his ears that he would eventually lose it all, and the first news he got from home told him the catastrophe had occurred. If he must listen to the disagreeable subject here he would have to take a ship and sail to the Sandwich Islands.

"One question and I have done," said Mr. Sewall. "Who sent you the news you speak of, that the securities were stolen?"

"Why—Keith. Morse came over and told him; and, as the only person who knew my address, the news had to come from his hand."

"That's all," said the minister, but to the disturbed mind of the young lawyer even these simple words were distasteful.

"I wouldn't believe a thing like that of Cyrus Keith," he exclaimed, "if he told me with his own lips he did it."

"People who know Paul Gardner are quite as sure of him."

“Why, then,” laughed Hall, “it comes back to the original starting place—to a man that everybody would believe it of—that every one *does* believe it of—Dick Morse, insurance agent!”

CHAPTER XXV.

VICTOR MAKES A PROPOSITION.

THE Feltons returned to town in a few days and began to talk of going home. Victor Hall earnestly hoped they would do so, for he wanted ample time to think over the new condition of things, unhampered by their presence. He had enough to do at the office to drive a sane man wild. Elsie's absence on some mysterious visit "to friends," into which he did not feel like inquiring deeply, worried him in a vague way. He missed the girl when evening came; and the fact that Gertrude was willing to devote to him all the time he wanted did not, somehow, answer the purpose. Mr. Gardner, too, was more persistent every day in his demands for money, and while the amounts were small and insignificant, the fact that he used them to get beastly drunk and went home to annoy Marian made the donor consider whether he should not put his foot down and stop the thing. Then Morse, who had gone away for a day or two, took a notion to return. Take it altogether, Mr. Hall found his life becoming one continuous burden.

"What do you think," said Mr. Felton to him one evening, when talking about returning to Stroniberg, "of my putting a paragraph in the newspapers an-

nouncing your engagement to Gerty? It would prepare the public, you know, and explanations could be made in a natural way."

What a business-like style he had in talking of delicate matters!

"I wouldn't do that—just yet," said Victor. "I don't see as there's any hurry."

"No, but it's all understood now, of course, between you young folks, and I want to do what is right on my side. You won't think of living out here, I suppose, after you're married? You can get the best business there is in Stromberg, or if you like it better, go to Chicago. If you don't feel like leaving your interests in the mine entirely, you can run out once or twice a year, or I would buy the whole thing for cash, if you'd prefer to sell."

Few men, even along a road they intend to travel, enjoy being pushed; and Victor Hall had still some lingering doubts whether he wanted to travel on this road at all.

"These things all require thought," he stammered, "and the best way is to let me think the matter over after you have gone and write you what decision I arrive at. My business, as you can see, is driving me fearfully, and I can hardly find time to eat and sleep. Allow me a month at least to settle these points and be sure everything is decided for the best."

Somewhat disappointed, Mr. Felton knew there was nothing he could do but accept this suggestion with as good grace as possible. He took pains to get a tacit acknowledgment that the engagement between Mr.

Hall and his daughter had never been broken off, in the presence of Mr. Whiteley, who according to instructions made a note to this effect in his diary. Then, as there might be such a thing as carrying the campaign too far at that season, the Feltons finally left town, Gertrude securing a promise from Victor to write often, and—what was of more importance—a kiss at the railway station that was witnessed by twenty people.

“Mr. Hall’s engaged to that Miss Felton who’s been here with her father,” all the gossips were saying, that evening. “He’s a millionaire and she’s his only child. Lord! what will Elsie Gardner say when she hears of it? Poor thing! She thought she was going to make that catch herself.”

It was a hard position for the young lawyer when the men around town began to throw out hints and even ask definite questions. He did not wish to admit the truth of what they had heard, but neither did he think it wise to deny it, when he might decide to marry Gertrude, after all. He contented himself with saying, “Did you?” to those who mentioned that they “had heard ” of his engagement, or “Indeed!” To others who asked if the rumor was true he said, “That’s a leading question,” and to still others he gave equally evasive answers. The result was that the story was confirmed in everybody’s mind and that Mr. Hall was voted “a mighty ’cute young feller,” who knew “on which side his bread was buttered.”

He wrote the letters he had promised, very brief ones they were, which he ascribed to the demands of

business, but avoided saying anything that would commit himself, quite as careful with the young lady in that respect as with the voracious public. But the postoffice employes knew his handwriting, and every envelope he addressed to Stromberg, Ill., was duly reported by the vigilant scouts inside the government building.

And all the time Mr. Hall was thinking, thinking, thinking, of Elsie Gardner. It surprised him that, wherever she had gone, he had received no letter from her. When she lived at the old ranch she used to write with regularity. Why should she do less now? He wouldn't ask questions of Marian. The way she had avoided telling him anything definite when he inquired where her sister had gone prevented that. All the same he wanted to know; and, the next time Mr. Gardner came in he managed to allude to the subject in an offhand way, hoping something would transpire from this source.

"Have you heard from Elsie, Mr. Gardner?" he asked, busying himself at the same time among his papers.

"I wouldn't be likely to hear nothin'," was the old man's reply. "I'm the last person any of 'em would write to, an' I'm their father, too!"

"Has she gone for long, do you think?"

"I dunno. Till she gits over it, I guess?"

"Is she sick?" asked Victor, with alarm.

"*Love*-sick. Leastwise, that's what I happened to hear her tellin' Marian. They don't let me inter any o' their secrets. Could you give me four bits?"

Although he had quite made up his mind that he would refuse the next request in this line (all the money he had given Gardner had come from his private purse) Hall was so startled by this statement that he handed the man the money and saw him depart with his usual celerity. Then he leaned back in his chair and pondered long.

“Lovesick?” Little Elsie? With whom could it be? He had never known her to show any special predilection for any young man.

It was the oddest thing he had heard for a long time! He began thinking of her in a bridal veil, with orange flowers in her hair, marching up the aisle of some grand church on the arm of an individual dressed in black. Absurd! She was a dear little child—quite unfitted for the dignities of matrimony—just a baby to be petted—and loved—

He closed his desk and went out for a walk, choosing the by-streets and finally passing the boundaries of the village. Down by an arroyo, shaded in places by stray specimens of the eucalyptus and the pepper tree, he sat down, and thought, and thought.

Something he had long had in mind came to him with renewed vigor. It was time he talked it over with Marian Gardner.

Back to the town he went, after an hour alone in the shade, and took his way to the cottage that Elsie had brightened by her presence, and in which her absence left a vacancy that could be felt even before he passed the gate. The cottage was fairly embowered in a mass of gold-of-Ophir roses, that peculiarly beautiful

flower of Southern California which transforms the most ordinary abode into a home fit for a goddess. Geraniums of gigantic size bloomed in the yard. Everything in nature took on the proportions of Brobdingnag. He alone had shrunk. His life seemed to have dwindled in the past few days to a tithe of its former dimensions.

"Marian, have you time for a few minutes' talk with me?" he asked, as the girl came to admit him.

"Surely," she said, and they seated themselves in the parlor.

"I want to do an act of simple justice, and you must not put any objections in my way. It has been my intention ever since the occasion arose that makes it seem right. You know how Whiteley obtained possession of your ranch. He knew or believed there was gold there and instead of telling you or me, he got Mr. Sherman to buy it and transfer it to him. Then he offered to put it in with the property he and I and Beal held together and, after discussing the matter in all its bearings, I consented. I was not easy in my mind, for I felt that strict honesty would have dictated a different course. If there was much gold to be found there I believed it belonged of right to you and yours. Before I knew anything about it, he had the deed. If I had declined to accept his proposal I should have been helpless to right the wrong. In taking a third interest I put it in my power to protect you to at least that extent. It was then possible for me to act as your trustee and to save a part for those who should have had it all."

The young woman listened with astonishment. She did not know what to say and she let him continue to the end.

"From the beginning, Marian, I never thought of taking anything out of this for myself. I could only protect you to the extent of one-third, but that I was determined you should have. For awhile it began to look as if there was a mistake—that the price you had received for your land was all it would ever prove to be worth. Later Whiteley's judgment proved correct, but in the meantime Mr. Beal had grown discouraged and sold out his share to us. That put an even half of everything at my disposal and I have retained it ever since—for you. It seems to me that the time has arrived when I should restore it. I don't think I shall remain much longer in California. I want to put into the hands of somebody you select my half of the mine and lands connected with it, for you—and—and Elsie—and the rest. You have full confidence in Mr. Sewall, suppose I make it over to him?"

The brow of the young lawyer was clouded, his voice was husky, he spoke as if under the pressure of strong emotion. When he ceased, Marian was silent for more than a minute.

"I am more surprised than I can express by what you tell me," she said, finally. "I am afraid you have overrated your duty. The enterprise of yourself and your partners has made the property we used to own a paying one. We have had our share of it already. If you insist I will tell the others what you say, but I know what my own position will be. I cannot accept

a penny and I think I can speak quite as confidently for my sister. At the same time I feel—and she will feel—the great nobility of character that leads you to make the offer, and you will have our undying gratitude just the same as if we agreed with you about it. It is the most generous thing I ever heard proposed, Mr. Hall, but I wish you would withdraw it.”

He was not surprised entirely at her attitude, but he persisted that he could not be content till his share of the mine—that had come into his hands in a way he had never felt right—was restored to the Gardner family. He was willing to submit a list of all the expenses of development, and as near as possible of the receipts from ore found on that side of the line—cutting the two in twain and giving up only what was clearly theirs. But she shook her head as decidedly as before.

“I question, with all respect, your right to speak for your sister,” he said, when he could not move her. “Can you not send for her and let me present the case exactly as I have presented it to you? There is a large sum at stake—not less, I estimate, than \$30,000 to be paid over in cash, beside the stock, that has now a high and increasing value. She ought to decide on a case like that with a full knowledge of all the facts.”

The figure he named surprised Marian and the wealth it placed before her dazzled her brain. How much might be done for Elsie—yes, and for the poor brother who was running such danger of apprehension and imprisonment, with \$30,000! But she felt as strongly as ever that the money ought not to be accepted—that it could not be in honor.

"There is something in what you suggest about my not being authorized to speak for the others," she admitted. "Elsie is visiting friends at some distance from here, and is not in the best of health. She has—an affection of the heart. I do not like to send for her to come home just yet. But I will write her, expressing no opinion of my own, and leave her to say what her judgment is. She will never take it, though, Mr. Hall, I am sure. She does not care for money, to begin with, and she expressed her opinion strongly when you came to us at the time Mr. Whiteley offered the property to you, that you had the fullest right to buy it and reap whatever benefit might accrue."

He looked like a sick man, leaning heavily on one elbow, that rested on an arm of the chair he occupied.

"There is still another member of your family who should be consulted," said he, gutturally. "One who has just as much legal right to anything that inures to your mother's estate as the rest of you. If you can reach him by mail—as I presume I have a right to surmise—his decision should not be overlooked. I am determined to surrender all my share in that property to some one. If part of you refuse to take it I shall give it to those, if any, who hold a different opinion."

Marian's head whirled. If she had a friend on earth whom she could trust it must surely be the man before her, urging her to accept a large part of the fortune he had acquired, even for the brother who stood before the law guilty of having robbed him.

"Mr. Hall," she said, rising and putting her hand on

his shoulder, "I still think it unwise to trouble Elsie with this matter now. If you cannot be moved from your purpose to offer to this family what I assure you I never will touch, myself, you may begin with Paul. That I trust you with all my heart you will be convinced when I tell you where to find him. He has been in your employ for several months under the name of 'Mason Harvey.' "

He looked as if about to swoon, but recovered himself and rose to go.

"I have no sister, Mannie," said he, holding out his hand as he used the affectionate diminutive. "Will you let me kiss you, as a token? "

She threw her arms around his neck, sobbing with the excess of her feeling, and, hardly less affected than she, he pressed his lips to her fevered cheek.

CHAPTER XXVI.

"MY WIFE NEEDS NO DEFENCE."

THE front door, near which they stood, had opened noiselessly and a stealthy step had crossed the threshold. Richard Morse stood gazing at the young couple with mild surprise. Overcome for the moment with indignation Victor turned and faced the intruder angrily.

"You impudent hound!" he cried. "Has it come to this, that you walk into private dwellings and spy on people, without even knocking? Take yourself out this instant!"

"First tell me what business it is of yours, whether I come here or not," was the bold reply. There was little of the Morse Victor had known in the new attitude and tone.

Marian stepped between the men, as if her slight touch could prevent the collision that threatened.

"For my sake, remember, both of you!" she ejaculated.

"I am the guardian of this young lady's estate and to a certain extent of herself," said Hall, restraining his wrath as well as he could. "And if I were not I would allow no interloper to annoy her. Again I tell you to go."

"And again I refuse," said Morse, returning his scowls with interest. "No, Marian," he continued, as the young woman appealed to him with her eyes to make no scene, "I have been misrepresented by this man too long. It is time I should speak out. He and I are enemies and nothing can be gained by silence." Then to Mr. Hall, "Perhaps you will feel your responsibility for this lady somewhat lessened when I tell you she is my wife!"

Victor fell back and looked from one of them to the other in amazement.

"Is it true?" he said to Marian, with white lips.

She bowed silently, with her eyes fixed on the carpet.

"Then I beg your pardon," he said, more to her than to Mr. Morse. "I may be excused, I think, for never dreaming of such a thing as that."

"But now that you know this you should learn some other facts," said Morse, bristling at the insulting insinuation. "You have acted toward me as if I were a crawling reptile, only fit to be spurned by your feet. I have endured it until I can do so no longer. If you have a particle of manhood in you, stay till I show you how bitterly I have been maligned. Marian, have you any influence with this hard man? If you have, join your entreaties to mine."

The feminine fear of scenes would have induced the young woman to evade the one impending, had she not been approached in this direct fashion. What her husband wanted to say must be known to Mr. Hall some time, and it might be as well to have the

agony over. To Victor's inquiring glance she responded with a look which showed that she wished him to remain and listen. Hesitating a moment between two opinions he gave in and laid down his hat.

"You have no faith in me," began Morse, "but I think you believe in the honesty of my wife. In anything I may say with which she differs I ask her in advance to tell you wherein I am wrong. There is no need of invention or exaggeration. The story is quite sufficient as it is.

"I have known the Gardner family, then, for more than twelve years; before, in fact, they moved from the East to California. Mrs. Gardner knew and trusted me—your mother was not the only person who ever did that, you see. I managed the little patrimony her father left her. After her health compelled her to move West I sent her the proceeds and from time to time such of the principal as she was obliged to have. Her husband, as you well know, was of no assistance during that time, having acquired habits that unfitted him for work or business.

"Nearly eight years ago Mrs. Gardner wrote me to come to Brayton. Mr. Gardner was using every effort to induce her to sell the ranch on which they resided, going even to the point of using threats (I must tell the whole story, Marian). She had a natural fear that if this home was sacrificed the dramshop would soon get the proceeds and she and her children be left without a roof to cover them. When I arrived I found a sharper in the house, with a deed already drawn up, and the two men trying to force a

pen into the hand of that invalid woman, lying helpless in her bed. Marian here was crying helplessly at the scene, while the younger ones had been sent on some errand by their shrewd father. I took in the situation at a glance. I asked Mrs. Gardner if she wished to sign the paper. She assured me in trembling tones that she did not. I reached out and as quick as a flash tore the document to bits before the eyes of the plotters, at the same time ordering the would-be purchaser from the room. Am I telling the exact truth, Marian?"

Mrs. Morse, who was pressing a handkerchief spasmodically to her eyes, nodded in acquiescence.

"Foiled in a plan he had nearly succeeded in accomplishing—that of robbing his wife of the little that remained to her, and for which the price to be paid was less than half what she had given for the property—Darius Gardner threw himself upon me. In defending my face from his blows I had to grapple with him. His accomplice lost no time in getting out of the house. I had succeeded in throwing my antagonist to the floor, his head striking some projection so severely that he lay unconscious, when his son Paul, a lad of fifteen, came in. Catching up a fruit knife that lay on a table, and without waiting to inquire as to the right or wrong of what he saw, he plunged it into my side. (Marian, I must tell everything now. I have a duty to myself that outweighs all else.)"

The last remark was caused by an appealing little

cry the wife had sent up, which implored him to spare allusions to her unhappy brother.

"I went down under that thrust," continued Morse, while Mr. Hall gazed at him half stupefied, "bleeding internally and nearly lost consciousness. Marian ran to the stable, put a bridle on a horse, rode to town and brought a doctor. His services were badly needed, you may believe. Mrs. Gardner, so ill that the greatest quiet had been enjoined on all the family, was hardly able to speak; her husband's head was tied up with cloths, which his son had procured for him; while I had come within half an inch of my death, a variation of that amount in the knife thrust being pronounced inevitably fatal. They took me to the doctor's residence, where I hovered between life and death, as it was, for several months. Youth and good habits—I am entitled to say that—brought me through, but I never have been and never shall be the man I was before. If you think a cut four inches deep in the side with a recently used fruit knife will add to one's physical stamina, Mr. Hall, you ought to try it. I found to the contrary.

"Of course the story that an affray had taken place got out and the authorities came to look into the matter. When they thought I would die they got depositions as to what had occurred. The evidence was all to one effect. I wanted them (Marian, did I, or did I not?) to consider Paul's offence the unpremeditated impulse of a boy who thought his father was being injured, but the court said no. On account of his extreme youth they would not sentence

him to an ordinary prison, but the impetuous temper he had shown made some restraint necessary. His father, to whom the entire family appealed, could only remember that he had been foiled in his attempt to get fifteen hundred dollars into his hands that he could spend for rum. He and Paul had never been very friendly, the boy too often taking the side of his mother when the father came home intoxicated. Paul went to the reform school, sentenced to remain there till he was of age."

Except for the tones of the speaker and the occasional gasps of his wife behind her handkerchief, the room was as still as a grave. There was something awful to Mr. Hall in this spirited defence from a man who had never seemed to have courage enough to face a sparrow.

"Moved by the entreaties of the poor mother, and," the voice sank to a whisper, "by the love already planted in my breast for this sweet girl, I tried in every way to secure a commutation of the sentence Paul received. At last I was successful. The Governor said if I would take him to Illinois and keep him under my personal supervision till he was twenty-one he might go with me. That was five years ago. While out here on this errand I confessed to Marian the love I had for her and tried to induce her to marry me then. She insisted that we must wait till Paul had redeemed himself from the blot on the family, but consented to go East and accept some suitable position which I was to procure her. At her request nothing was said to her mother or the others of the en-

gement between us, she fearing it might disturb the invalid. The excuse was made that, owing to her father's growing irritability and bad habits, as well as the waning fortunes of the family, it was best for her to do something for herself. After two years, during which I constantly urged that our marriage take place, an event occurred that postponed it still further. That event was the one in which you are interested and need not be detailed here at length.

"But what must be told," pursued Mr. Morse, raising his voice, after a momentary pause for breath, "is this: That in my fierce determination to do right by you, sir, I used every effort to force out of my prospective brother-in-law the hiding place of your property, even to prosecuting him relentlessly, and seeing him taken to prison on a five-years' sentence; even to hearing from his sister's lips that, if I persisted, she would never be my wife! I loved her as I do to-day, as I have since she was a child, passionately and devotedly—and I told her, notwithstanding, that I would sacrifice my happiness, if need be, on the altar of my business honor. Until I could go to you, Mr. Hall, and say, 'Here are the bonds that were stolen while in my custody,' I would never rest content. The dear girl, after proving to her satisfaction that I could not be moved from what I thought just, and learning, I hope, to appreciate the sentiments that moved me, finally consented to have the ceremony that made us one performed. A letter from her mother made her feel it her duty to return to her old home, however, and after we were united she took the first train.

‘When may I come to see you?’ I asked. ‘When we have proved my brother an innocent man,’ she answered, and with those words vanished from my view. I could not chide her for holding to her sense of duty as strongly as I held to my own. She believes her brother an injured man, to-day; I know him to be a guilty one; and until he makes restitution of what he has taken I will pursue him, though in the meantime my heart is breaking for the love of the sweetest and purest wife man ever possessed.”

Mr. Hall sprang from his chair like one demented.

“I can’t listen to this!” he cried, his nerves twitching. “I have made an awful mistake! Forgive me, Mr. Morse, and you, too, Marian, if you can. You never intended, sir, to rob me, though I believed it with all my soul. But neither did Paul Gardner. No, no! There is some other explanation to this mystery and I will devote myself to unearthing it. Yes, I will abandon my pursuit of business and fortune till I have righted him in your eyes as you have righted yourself in mine!”

The insurance man did not respond with any enthusiasm to this admission and declaration. He had said his say—as the expression goes—and the opinion of this person, whether he was enemy or friend, mattered nothing to him.

“In reference to what you saw when you entered the house to-night,” pursued Hall, thinking something in this line was required, “let me assure you that your wife could not be more sacred to me if she were my sister.”

"My wife needs no defence from you, sir," was the brusque retort. "I criticise nothing more than her taste in bestowing friendship on one so unworthy. I think you will now admit my right to be alone with Mrs. Morse, and I hope you will excuse us from your company for the present."

Though Marian looked the picture of distress at this statement, the words were spoken. With head aching and with limbs that seemed like lead Mr. Hall went back to the hotel.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE BIRD TAKES FLIGHT.

It still lacked some minutes of five o'clock, the hour at which the law offices were usually closed to the public. After a slight rest Mr. Hall began to think of the danger in which Paul Gardner would be if he continued in his present situation. Mr. Morse had made no secret of his intentions. If he discovered the identity of the escaped prisoner he would without doubt put the authorities on his track. The lawyer roused himself, put on his hat again and, though weary and far from well, dragged himself to his business rooms.

Paul was still there and luckily alone. Without circumlocution Hall told him what he had learned from Marian and advised him to lose no time in putting a long distance between himself and Olluma.

"You are entitled as much as the others to share in your mother's property," he said, "which has turned out more valuable than was expected. I have an explanation to make in regard to that matter, but it will have to be deferred till you are in less danger. Take my advice and leave town at once. Here is a sum of money that you will find handy. You can accept it without compunction, as it is really your own. When

you are safe at some distant point, write me and I will do everything in my power to assist you further."

"You do not believe me guilty, then?" said the grateful youth, as he accepted the proffered funds.

"No, I never have believed it, since I first heard of your misfortune, which was but recently. Neither do I think Morse took the bonds, though it is only within the last hour that I heard his full story. I am going to prove who did it, if I am not mistaken, and then all doubts of your innocence will be removed. Go now, Paul, without delay. Something tells me that you are in great danger and that every minute you remain in Olluma is perilous. Take one of the country roads and board a train at a way station. You have made too good a fight to let them take you now."

Paul set his lips together in a determined way.

"They never shall take me, Mr. Hall," he said. "I have suffered all the imprisonment I will for a crime I never committed. Your kindness is fully appreciated and you shall never regret it. Good-by."

"Good-by. In an hour I hope you will be far from here and that your tracks will be so well covered no one can trace you."

The alarm that Mr. Hall felt had by this time become thoroughly communicated to the younger man. He started first to go to his lodgings, but paused ere he reached there, conjuring up the spectre of an officer of the law waiting for him at the door. Turning into a by-street he walked rapidly toward the outskirts, with no definite destination in view. Before going far he saw his brother Jacob, who was hastening after him.

"Mannie sent me to tell yer she t'inks Morse is on," he said, out of breath. "She wants yer to git out o' town as quick as yer kin. Here is some boodle ter pay yer way."

"I don't need the money, Jakey, and I am going away now. Mr. Hall warned me at the office and gave me plenty of cash to start with. I can't stop even to talk with you, so good-by."

But Jacob had no idea of being "shaken" in this summary fashion. No one was near, as they had passed the line of residences, and he kept up at a dog-trot with the rapid steps of the other.

"Hall gave yer money!" he repeated, with a grimace of dissatisfaction. "Then he's up ter some trick and yer'd better look out. He cheated us out o' de ranch and he's no frien' of mine. Whar yer goin', Paul? I'll bet anything he's gone to de perlice and sent 'em after yer."

The boy's language had been "enriched" by certain acquaintances he had recently made, till it was worse than ever.

"Nonsense, Jakey! Why would he give me the money and advise me to run away if he meant to do that?"

"So's he could pertend he didn't. Oh, he's a deep un! P'raps when dey catch yer an' fine de money on yer, he'll say yer stole it from his office. He an' Morse have been togedder lots lately. Don't trust him, Paul; he'll t'row yer down, sure's yer livin'."

Improbable as the idea seemed, it troubled the elder brother, now considerably excited. He asked Jacob

what he could do, if he was not to follow the advice of his late employer.

"I've got a plan fer yer. I've knowed fer a long time ye'd have ter make a skip, an' I've ben preparin'. It'll be dark in an hour an' we kin take de road to Brayt'n. Dere's no railroad dere an' dey'll never t'ink o' lookin' fer yer in dat direction. De ol' barn we uster own is empty now, an' I've got a lot of stuff laid away, 'spect-in' dis very t'ing. Dar's vittles enough to last two of us a week or more, besides de rifle an' shot-gun an' plenty of ammunition. I tole Mannie when she sent me to yer to-night dat I might go wid yer a piece, so she won't be scairt if I don't git home. Dat barn's de place, Paul. Ef yer try ter git on ter a train, dey'll telegraph ahead an' cotch yer easy."

In his nervous state Paul Gardner was ready to grasp at any straw. He welcomed the aid of his small friend, at a time when every bush seemed an officer and every whisper in the pepper trees a "Surrender or I fire!" The shadows were falling and soon they would be able to pursue their way unobserved by any late passer along the highway. Without accepting his brother's proposition in words he continued his rapid walk, occasionally replying to the latter's observations. In this way they did the twenty miles, without, so far as they could see, being pursued by any hostile force, and shortly after one o'clock came to the place desired.

"There's a light in one of the rooms of the house," whispered Paul, as they approached.

"Yes, some o' de miners put up dere; but dere's no-

body in de barn, not even a hoss, an' we kin hide dere till it's safe ter move on."

Creeping around to the rear of the structure the boys entered noiselessly. Jakey proudly pointed out, by the dim light that entered from a hole in the roof, the small armory he had sequestered, and the stock of food he had smuggled away, on a recent visit to the neighborhood, during a school vacation. He was in ecstasies, having at last entered on a career in opposition to the constituted authorities of the land, such as had been dear to his little heart ever since he was old enough to read his first dime novel. But both were very tired and after a few whispered words they fell into a sound sleep, that lasted till noon.

In the meantime events at Olluma proved that Paul had taken his departure none too soon. Mr. Morse had overheard the words of his wife to Hall, "He is in your employ under the name of Mason Harvey," just as he opened the door of the cottage and found them together. Like a flash he realized what it was in the clerk's face that had haunted him with reminiscence. The absconding prisoner was there, where one would be least likely to suspect, brazening it out to the very faces of the men he had wronged. Cunning and cool, Morse decided that his best course was to disarm suspicion by completing his call at the Gardners' in the usual way, and not acting as if in any haste to depart. He stayed an hour after Mr. Hall went out, and then walked leisurely to the hotel and took his dinner at a table but a few feet from that occupied by the attorney. At eight o'clock he strolled out on the street and went

leisurely to the residence of the chief of police, with whom he had already become acquainted and who knew the cause that had brought him to California.

"I've located our man," said he, when he was alone with the officer. "If you will bring two or three fellows with you after ten o'clock we can take him quietly out of his bed and save all trouble."

The officer knew that a reward of \$500 was outstanding for the culprit, and had been assured that he would also be remunerated from the private purse of his informant in case he secured the fellow. He rubbed his hands together with satisfaction, therefore, and asked for fuller particulars.

"I don't think I need any help," he said, when the matter was explained to him. "I could take half a dozen young chaps like that alone."

"You'd better not risk it. He's sure to have a pistol and he's desperate. I don't want to touch him, of course, being my wife's brother, so you mustn't depend on me. Take men enough, for if he gets away now, I shall have had all my trouble for nothing."

After some further talk it was agreed that two other police should accompany the chief, to picket the grounds in case there was a premature alarm. The wily officer wanted all the glory to be achieved from apprehending with his own single hand this famous desperado, and above all things of securing for himself the reward whose offer had been for months pasted on the scrapbook of his office.

The chief had no trouble in learning where Whiteley & Hall's clerk roomed. Olluma was just the sized town

for everybody to know things like that. There were very few people who wanted board, and fewer yet who made a business of furnishing that commodity. Mr. Morse went back to the hotel and awaited with anxiety the signal the chief promised when he had the much wanted man under lock and key.

It was a period of severe mental strain to the insurance man. Much as he wanted to regain possession of the securities—which he had small doubt would soon follow this arrest—he could not help thinking of Marian. To find her brother again in custody, trapped by her husband, would reopen all the unhappy differences that time might have closed. It was a sad necessity that faced him. Had the property been his own—or had he possessed sufficient personal fortune to make the loss good to Mr. Hall—he would have sacrificed it instantly rather than bring one tear to the eyes he loved. His honor as a trustee was an entirely different thing. He must make the world admit that his character was untarnished, before he could introduce to that world the wife who would be to a great extent affected by his own standing.

At about 11 o'clock he received the signal agreed on that the head of the police department of Olluma was ready to see him. This was a whistle from the street above the hotel, made on the implement ordinarily used for police calls. Hastening to the place, Mr. Morse found a much disgruntled man awaiting him.

"Our bird has flown," he said. "He didn't come to dinner and we can't find any one who saw him leave the office. Something's put him on his guard."

"Then rouse up the telegraph operator and send the news in every direction!" cried the excited Mr. Morse. "He has probably taken to the railroad and can be cut off if you are quick."

Together they went to the house of the telegraph operator, who proved to be a young woman and whom the promise of five dollars for extra speed did not stimulate to much celerity. The perspiration streamed down Morse's face at the delay. He was a prey to bitter regrets, for if he had left Marian at once when he heard the accusing sentence he would certainly have been in time to intercept Paul.

Even a female telegraph operator can be moved in time, however, and about midnight the news of the escape was being read in all directions. The greatest fear Morse had now was caused by the fact that at most of the smaller stations the operators had, like her, left their posts and would not return till morning. Nothing could be done about it, and paying the woman her money, which she received with not even a "thank you," he left the place.

"Have you seen the livery men?" he asked, as a new thought struck him. "He may have hired a team."

No, the astute guardian of the peace had not seen the livery men. He was not used to anything larger in the way of crime than a common drunk or a petty larceny. Besides he was sleepy and the bright vision of the \$500 reward had faded from his view till he had little hopes of ever seeing it again. He told Mr. Morse that he was not feeling well, that he guessed he would go home and get his rest, and that, if he thought it worth while to see

the livery stable keepers (which the other did not believe) he would lend him one of his men as a guide. Accepting the offer, Morse went from one stable to another, rousing gruff hostlers from their "beauty sleep," but of course with no result. As a last resource he went to the hotel and awoke Mr. Hall from what was at best but a fitful and unsatisfactory nap.

"Well, your new clerk has run away," he said, when the lawyer reluctantly admitted him and sat down on the edge of the bed in his pyjamas.

"I'm glad to hear that," was the nonchalant reply.

"I hope he's robbed your safe of all the valuables in it," was the spiteful suggestion.

"Thank you. I'm not so big a fool as to trust the combination of a safe containing my clients' papers to a young man whose previous bad reputation is known to me."

All the regret Victor had felt at his injustice was laid aside in the presence of Morse's sarcasm.

"You know, I presume, that it is a legal offence, punished with imprisonment, to aid and abet an escaped criminal?" said Morse, coloring.

"I know in a matter of that kind the important thing to procure is evidence; and unless you have any, I would remind you that accusation of crime is in itself a legal offence. Now, Morse, you and I've had trouble enough. So has poor Paul Gardner. I will execute to you a receipt in full of all you ever owed me—acknowledge that your trust was well and honestly fulfilled—if you will let up on that boy. Can't you do it—for the

sake of his sister—if I am willing to sacrifice \$40,000?”

The man shook his head sternly.

“Before I accept a receipt in full from you,” he said, “I will put the lost property in your hands. When I have done that—on your thirtieth birthday—I shall be happy to settle our personal differences in any way you suggest.”

“What! You’re talking of a duel?” said Victor, with a light laugh.

“I wish to God we could have one, now, in this room, with *knives*,” muttered Morse, with set teeth. “You’ll have your opportunity some day, believe me!”

With a most malevolent look he ground his heel in the carpet and left the room.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

“DAT’S A GAL, DE WORL’ OVER!”

JUST after dark, three days from the time Jacob Gardner secreted himself and Paul in the barn at the old ranch near Brayton, that young man emerged from his concealment and took his way stealthily toward the village. Creeping along, with a look-out for “spotters,” he came at last to the house where Mr. Sewall lived, and reconnoitred for some minutes in hopes to get sight of that individual, without attracting the attention of other inmates of the dwelling. The room in which the minister was usually to be found was dark and Jacob concluded that he had gone out. The best thing then, was to lie in wait for him on his return. As the boy had nothing else to do he lay down behind a hedge and bided his time.

An hour passed before anybody came in sight, and then it was not Mr. Sewall, but the Chinese cook who had formerly been employed by the Gardner family. Recognizing Ah Wing, Jacob went up to him boldly. He knew the Celestial could be trusted implicitly.

“Hullo, Wing,” he said. “Don’t yer know me? It’s Jakey Gardner.”

Wing, who had thought for a moment that the apparition was a robber, and that the little store of money

which he carried on his person was to be filched from him, was much relieved. He was cooking for a family in the town and had been making a call on some Chinese friends in the outskirts. On being asked if he would go and tell Mr. Sewall he was wanted, being careful not to let any one else know who had sent him, he informed Jacob that the minister had not been in Brayton for some days and that he had gone "way off somewhere on the 'laiload.'"

This was a severe disappointment and for some seconds Jacob scratched his head puzzled what to do.

"What want?" asked Ah Wing.

"I want him ter write a letter ter me sister Else dat I'm all right. She don't know where I am."

"Want tell Miss Elsie you allee light?" said Wing. "Why you no go tell her you self? She live next stleet, in big housee."

Jacob uttered a low exclamation of surprise.

"You not know Misse Elsie live in big housee?" said Wing.

"Naw. How long's she be'n here an' who's wid her?"

"Nobody with her, only folkee in housee. Want show placee? Come 'long."

As the boy followed the Chinaman he asked more questions than Wing could answer. He had evidently heard nothing of the stirring events that filled Jakey's head. Before they reached the residence where Elsie was staying, the boy impressed on Wing the necessity of telling no one he had seen him, except Elsie herself, and then only in the lowest tones.

The Chinaman understood and proved a most valuable assistant. Telling Jacob to "lait" for him he went around to the kitchen, where he secured an ally in the person of the family's Chinese domestic. Elsie was thus notified in a way that attracted no attention and came out of the rear door under Wing's pilotage. The night was quite dark and she reached the place where Jakey awaited her without being discovered.

"Good-night, Wing," said the boy, before beginning his explanations with his sister. "Be careful, never tell dis, now."

"Good-nightee. Me nebber tellee; hopee me die!" said the Chinaman, making a significant move with his hand across his throat.

"What have you come here for?" asked Elsie. "And why didn't you knock at the door and ask for me instead of sending in this mysterious way?"

"Hain't yer heard nothin'?" said the astonished boy.

"About what?"

"Oh, Lord! Have I got ter go over de hull t'ing? Well, den, close yer mout' an' lis'en. An' if yer feel like yellin' don't do it, onless yer wants to send half yer family ter de gallers."

It was evident that something most important was to be divulged and the girl's heart began to palpitate. She sat down in the grass by her brother's side and waited, with white cheeks.

"I've got ter tell yer a lot," he began, "or yer won't onnerstan' de sittivation. Dar's so much, I don't

know how ter begin. Yer knew Paul was locked up out East fer stealing dat stuff from Morse?"

"Yes, the poor, dear fellow—as honest a child as ever breathed."

"Dat ain't de point jes' now—whedder he was honest or not. De point is dat he skipped out and come home one night, weeks an' weeks ago. Mannie let him in an' give him some grub an' den he hid in de barn; it was before we left der old place, yer see."

Elsie's heart beat more rapidly than ever. She said "Yes, yes!" in a way that showed her deep interest in the history.

"De next mornin' Mannie tole me about it an' I went out to carry him some t'ings. She didn't tell Pa, of course, dat wouldn't 'a' ben sense; nor you, cause dere wa'n't no need o' bringin' kids inter de deal. Paul stayed hid up till Mannie went ter Illinoy, ter find out how hot de prison folks was on his trail, and den he come out. He'd changed a lot sence he used ter live in dese parts, and I'd never knowed him myself if Mannie hadn't put me on. So he walks right up ter Mr. Whiteley an' gits a job clerkin' in his office, ter bluff de gang, in case dey got a notion he was out dis way."

The girl could hardly believe her ears.

"Not that clerk I used to see there?" she gasped.

"De very same. Yer never got onter him, an' even Pa didn't have a smidg' of s'picion, dough he saw him more'n wonst. But w'en Morse come out here, it begun to look more ticklish. Mannie got scairt, cos Morse swore he'd never let up on him, an' last

week she told Hall who his clerk was. Nice perceedin', I *don't* tink, an' him de feller de stuff belonged ter dat was stole!"

Elsie was too anxious to hear the story to the end to waste time with many interpolations, so she merely said, "Go on, go on!"

"Hall, as is natral (dis is *my* t'eory, see?) wanted ter git his han's on Paul widout semin' ter be in the t'ing. So he goes back to his shop an' hands him a big wad of dough—"

"Of what?"

"Dough; stuff; boodle—cash, yer know, an' tells him ter light out. I was lucky 'nuff ter meet him jest as he was makin' tracks, an' he let me do de steerin'. Hall spected o' course dat he'd leg it fer de railroad an' git on a train, where he could telegraph to de perlice to nab him. I says, 'Don't yer do nothin' o' de kind. Come down ter Brayt'n an' hide in de barn on de old ranch where we uster live,' I says. An' dat's what we did, an' we've been hid up sense Sunday. Whew! What a long yarn dis is!"

Elsie, whose face shone pale in the shadow, asked nervously if there had been any sign that the boys were followed or their hiding place suspected.

"Not yit; but dey'll git onter us sure, in time, an' w'en dey does dey'll git a warmin' up dat'll do 'em good. We ain't goin' ter be took alive and before dey gits our dead bodies, a few of 'em'll bite de dust, as Old Sleuth says in 'Dare Devil Dick.'"

The pride of the boy at his use of these expressions was great, as well as in his knowledge of literature.

Elsie was too much occupied in the dilemma which he outlined even to chide him.

"Have you had nothing to eat for three days, then?" she asked, with a little feminine shudder at the thought.

"Nothin' ter eat? Lived like fitin' cocks! I had a lot of grub stowed away ready fer jest such a t'ing as dis. Oh, we ain't starved, by no means, but we're runnin' shy now. If yer kin smuggle us a little fresh stuff, it'll be gratefully received, as de posters say. Leave it anywhere in de nayborhood and we'll see yer from cracks in de barn. But I'm fergittin' de main t'ing. I wan't yer ter write ter Mannie dat we're safe. Put it in a nambaggous way, as de books call it, so's noboddy else would git on if de letter was opened. Tell her as soon as we t'ink de hunt is coolin' Paul'll strike out fer some odder part o' de kentry an' I'll show up home. Say we ain't de least bit scairt an' dat Paul's got dough enough ter start a bakery. Won't it be the best joke on Hall w'en he finds Paul's got safe wid de stuff he meant ter catch on him an' swar he stole it f'om his safe?"

The girl rose to her feet. Now that the strange tale had reached an end the significance of her brother's insinuations against Mr. Hall merited her attention.

"You are a wicked boy to talk in that way about the best friend we ever had," she said, chokingly. "He thinks, of course, that Paul stole his property—all he had in the world at the time—and yet he has, you say, warned him to escape Morse's clutches and given him

money to assist in his flight. It's the noblest act I ever heard of, and I shall remember him for it with gratitude all my life."

"Rats!" said the boy, in derision. "Yer stuck on de bloke, dat's all. Did yer see de piece in de Olluma Eagle, how he's goin' ter marry dat Felton gal? He's bin gittin' yer in love till yer sick, an' den he goes back on yer, jest as I knew he would, dat time I frew his money in de road. I'd like ter fetch him one on de nob wid a crowbar!"

The young fellow clinched his fist as if he wished his enemy was near enough for him to execute his threat. But he melted a little when he saw the big tears in his sister's eyes.

"Jakey, I did see the piece in the paper, and I knew all about it before, for Miss Felton showed me her engagement ring. I am not ashamed to tell you—my little brother—that I do love Mr. Hall. That is no reason, though, why you should abuse him. He never said a word to encourage me. I loved him before I realized how far my feelings had carried me; and when I saw what I had done I told Mannie and she advised me to come down here and stay till he had closed up his affairs and gone back where he came from. I didn't want him to know how I felt, for it would only distress him. Now, my dear brother, won't you try to think a little more justly of him, for my sake? If poor Paul is ever arrested again, you will see how Mr. Hall will stand by him. He is so good, so pure and true!"

Refusing to assent to the request, Jacob went so

far at least as not to combat the sentiments in words. He said he must be getting back to his brother and that Elsie ought to return to the house before her absence was discovered.

"If yer kin bring anyting in de eatin' line, an' leave it around de barn, it may come handy," he said, before departure.

"I'll manage it. I wish I could creep over there to-night and put my arms around Paul's neck and tell him how dearly I love him. Take him a kiss for me, Jakey, won't you?"

The boy dodged the offered embrace as if it had been a blow.

"Dat's all gals tink of!" he said, with aversion in his face. "Huggin' an' kissin' and such rot! It makes me sick ter de stummick. So long, Else!"

"And you'll try to think more kindly of Mr. Hall?"

He whistled a low strain, with averted countenance.

"Dat's a gal, de worl' over!" he retorted. "T'row 'em down an' dey'll lick yer han's like a dog. Git 'em mashed on yer, an' den quit 'em fer anodder petticoat; dey'll cry, an' say yer too sweet ter live. If Hall keeps out o' my way an' let's yer alone, I ain't got no row wid him, unless he tackles Paul. But dat Morse, if he'n I ever gits ter close quarters, he'll t'ink a cata-mount's lit on his back. Good-by, Else. Don't fer-git de grub."

Jacob went back to the barn, along the shadiest side of the road, while the sister reached her room unobserved, except by the faithful Chinaman who had sat up for her.

But along in the wake of the small brother crept another figure, far behind and yet never letting him out of sight, till he disappeared in the old building which sheltered Paul from the pursuing minions of the law.

CHAPTER XXIX.

AN ASSAULT ON THE OLD BARN.

ELSIE slept little that night. She rose early in the morning and wrote to Marian, letting her know in a guarded manner that Paul and Jacob had been heard of, and that, so far as they knew, the police were not informed of their whereabouts. Then she began to study up some plan to get the refreshments that Jakey had asked for to the imprisoned boys. After long thought she hit upon a scheme.

She went over to one of the neighbor's houses, where there was a girl of about her own age, and asked her how she would like to spend the day in picnicking. The girl was much pleased with the idea and named half a dozen others of her acquaintances that she thought would be glad to join. In an hour the party was arranged and by nine o'clock the little procession took up its way to the old ranch of the Gardners, which Elsie named as the pleasantest place to hold it.

"There's a barn there that's not used now," she said, "and we can have lots of fun. If a rain comes up we shall be sheltered, too."

She urged each member of the party to bring a liberal supply of edibles, declaring they would be 'starved to death' by noontime. Each girl carried,

therefore, a large basket, and the articles included besides the food some bottles of ginger-ale, and a quantity of lemons and sugar. Elsie meant to leave all she could for her brothers at the end of the feast.

On the way a buggy, containing two men, passed them. She overheard words from one of the pair that startled her greatly.

"He's here, I tell you. I think there's a gang together, and it'll take a good-sized posse to handle them. As soon as we get to Olluma I'm going to get Whiteley to help us raise a crowd. The reward of \$500 is as good as ours already."

To the suspicious mind of the young woman this referred without doubt to her brother and she wanted more than ever to get into communication with Paul. As it would take the buggy till the middle of the afternoon to reach Olluma, and a number of hours for the occupants to return with the people they were to get, there was fortunately plenty of time. When the picnic was over she must find some way to carry the warning she had luckily obtained.

Cunning being necessary in the game she was playing, Elsie walked boldly up to the ranch house and greeted a woman who came to the door.

"My name is Gardner," she said, smiling, "and I used to live here. I want to know if you'll let these friends of mine and me use the barn for a picnic. We'll be careful not to hurt anything."

"Why, of course. Use anything you want. I'm afraid you'll find it pretty dusty in there, though. Nobody's used it since we came here."

"Thank you," said Elsie. "Will you let me have the key?"

She knew perfectly well there was no lock on the rear door, but she meant to disarm suspicion. When the woman told her how to enter, she thanked her again and, joined by the girls, went to the barn. She entered first, so that her familiar voice would be heard by Jacob in time for him to hide, should he be in an exposed position, but as the girls had been singing on their way from the house he was sure to know of their presence before that time.

"Come in!" she called. How nice it seems to be in the dear old place! Olluma is all right, but there's something fascinating about the country, after all."

"I shouldn't think you'd know the ranch," remarked one of the others, "with the new houses that are being built on the other side and the heaps of dirt the miners have thrown out. It was a pity to spoil such a lovely place."

One of the others said wisely that gold was better than orange trees or alfalfa, and to this Elsie laughed an agreement. The lunch-baskets were put away and the girls went out to take a walk over the premises.

"I hope nobody'll come and steal our stuff," said one. "We should be in a nice pickle, come noon, if our baskets were found empty."

"I don't think anybody around Brayton would be so mean," said Elsie. "When we get through, though, if there's anything left, I hope some poor person will happen along, that we can give it to. One of the

greatest pleasures in life is giving away things you don't want yourself."

This brought a hearty laugh from all present and the girls sauntered off, with their arms around each other's waists.

The time till noon sped swiftly. The foreman of the mine recognized Elsie, for one thing, and invited them all to inspect the work that was being done. They had a thousand questions to ask about the business, which he answered with the pride of superior knowledge. They went back after that to the foothills and down into an arroyo, picking and eating some oranges found on the trees that were still undestroyed.

It was one o'clock when they reached the barn again and though their appetites had been somewhat lessened by the fruit, of which Elsie had made them eat all she could, they spread out the food they had brought and, seated in a circle, enjoyed the meal to the utmost.

This ended, they voted themselves too tired to walk any more and, lying back in comfortable positions, their skirts gathered up for the sake of cleanliness, they told stories and sang songs till it was time to go home.

"There's an awful lot left," remarked one girl, as they packed away the napkins, glasses, spoons and forks. "I'm afraid your 'poor person' won't come along, Miss Gardner."

"Never mind, it'll be a treat for the rats!" said Elsie. Then an idea struck her and she uttered a scream, at the same time starting as if in fright. "Gracious, there's a big one now! *Run, girls, run!*"

With screams that could hardly have been excelled in volume had a tiger fresh from the jungle been discovered, the girls went, helter-skelter, out of the door. Elsie climbed a ladder that connected with the hay-mow, instead, acting as if more scared than any of the others. When she knew none of her friends could hear she said in a stage whisper, "Paul!" and a faint voice replied.

"The officers are coming after you. Get out to-night early or they will be here. There's plenty of food downstairs. Good-by, dear, and God bless you!"

She clung to the ladder, descending slowly, and the girls, who had recovered something of their courage, came and peeped in at the door, laughing at her.

"Are you sure it's gone?" she asked in mock terror. "Oh, look carefully before I step foot on the floor. I should drop dead if it ran after me!"

Two of the older girls opened the barn-door wide and declared there was nothing to be seen of the terrible rodent. Elsie thereupon jumped from the ladder's third round and, after falling in her haste, reached the outside trembling.

Between serious talks about rats they had seen and heard of, and occasional laughs at the danger they had escaped, the party wandered homeward and there our interest in them ceases. It may please the reader, however, to know that within five minutes of their disappearance two hungry boys were feasting on prime sandwiches, jelly-roll, tarts and ginger-ale and at the

same time discussing the information conveyed by Elsie's ingenious stratagem.

Mr. Sewall returned from his journey toward the evening of that day, having been to Stromberg on what he was convinced was a useless errand. He had evolved a theory, based on what he had heard of the mysterious robbery of the bonds from Mr. Morse's safe, that Cyrus Keith might know more about the matter than he was willing to admit. He knew that Keith was a warm partisan of Victor Hall's, and held his opinion that the securities were anything but safe for their prospective owner in Morse's hands. He knew also that Keith had been in temporary possession of them only a few days before they were missed and thought it possible that, in his zeal to protect the interests of his young friend, he had taken illegal custody of them at that time. It was a rather queer guess, it must be admitted, but nothing but guesses seemed of much use in a case so shrouded in obscurity. The theory, if true, ruined the character of a highly respected citizen and member of the bar—a man trusted to an unusual extent by his fellows and who had never been accused of unfaithfulness in any relation of life.

But a brief interview with Mr. Keith convinced the minister that he was on the wrong track. The anxiety over the matter which the lawyer showed was wholly incompatible, in the mind of Mr. Sewall, with such a procedure as he had mentally charged him with. After going over carefully every phase of the case that was

known to Mr. Keith, the minister came to the conclusion that his talents did not lie in the line of private detecting. He had to admit to himself that a wild goose chase was the only thing comparable to his errand.

Elsie returned from her picnic and found him waiting for her at the house where she boarded. From her he learned for the first time of Paul's flight, (not having been to Olluma at all, but having left his train at a small station nearer Brayton). He was much troubled at the news, as he felt that the boy was in great danger of being apprehended, now that his description was better known and the fact that he was in that part of California could be telegraphed to all adjacent points. Of course Elsie kept to herself the fact that her brothers were concealed in the barn at the ranch, feeling that this was a secret it could do no possible good to reveal even to this trusted friend.

In the middle of the night a posse of men, to the number of fifteen, alighted from a wagon drawn by four horses, at a point a little distant from the Gardner homestead. It was headed by the sheriff of the county, a man named Stocker, and included Mr. Morse, Mr. Whiteley and two of the regular police of Olluma. The chief had declined to make the trip, having abandoned all hope of securing the reward, in case of success, as the sheriff was his ranking official in an outlying section like this. After a hurried consultation, Mr. Stocker directed his following how to move, and they proceeded stealthily in four directions, so as to

descend on the " desperadoes " in a manner that would cut off all chance of escape.

When the place was in this way surrounded the sheriff boldly opened the rear door, and cried out in a distinct voice, " Paul Gardner, I call on you to surrender, in the name of the law. I have a large force who guard this barn on every side. Resistance on your part is simple folly. We are all armed and if you compel us to do so shall use violent means. Come down like a sensible fellow and make the best of it."

The answer he received was sufficiently distinct to be heard and understood, not only by himself, but by the others. A rifle ball whistled in dangerous proximity to his head. This was so unexpected that the official beat a hasty retreat and was for some minutes in doubt what to do.

Mr. Whiteley volunteered at last to try the effect of his own persuasion. Taking up a position at a corner of the barn, where he thought himself somewhat safer than in the open, he addressed the occupant of the structure:

" Listen, Harvey. It is I, Mr. Whiteley. I have come with the sheriff to see that you are treated with consideration. I am sorry, but he has a warrant for you and nothing can prevent your arrest. Surrender and I will do all I can to procure your release afterwards. But if you resist with unlawful arms an officer of the State, it is certain to go hard with you. Nothing less than a life sentence would follow, I fear, any injury you might do in this way."

Another loud report conveyed the only answer to

this speech, and a splinter torn out of a board showed where the ball had taken effect.

Thus the argument went on, being joined in, from time to time, by various others in the party, including even Morse, who conjured with the name of the sisters the young man was supposed to hold dear.

No verbal response had been obtained when an hour had gone by. People from the adjacent village began to appear, attracted by the sound of the firing. Among those who came were Mr. Sewall and Elsie, whose distress at the conditions they found was great. The sheriff, on learning of the relationship of the young woman to the man wanted, talked with her at some length in reference to the certain fate that lay in store for Paul if he kept up his present tactics. Quite convinced that she had a duty to perform in adding her warning to the others Elsie finally joined her trembling voice to theirs.

"Paul," she called, "you won't shoot me, I know, your sister, and you won't believe I would offer any but the best advice. It's hard to be pursued for a crime of which you are innocent, but they are too strong. If you love me, Paul, run no more risk. You will certainly be killed if you attempt it."

Dead silence followed the plaintive request. The sheriff whispered to Mr. Sewall to take the ladies out of harm's reach, as he was going to order a rush and capture the man at any cost. Sobbing as if her heart was broken, Elsie suffered herself to be led off with the others. There was nothing more that she could do. They were going to murder her darling brother, after

all the wrong that had been done him. And she was helpless to prevent the outrage.

Stocker found that only six of his entire party were willing to follow him into the barn, and muttering a curse at the cowardice of the others, he arranged his plans.

"Follow me, rough and tumble," he said. "If you see a head inside there shoot it full of lead without a second's hesitation. We can't mince matters with a crowd like that. I've no doubt there are half a dozen of them, but we got six shots apiece in our revolvers and after one round it'll all be over. No flinching now. Are you ready?"

They said they were, and uttering in a whisper the single word, "Now!" the assault began. In two seconds the sheriff and his gallant crew were inside the barn, while the less courageous ones waited to pick off any man that started to escape.

Then the air was filled with the noise of firearms as if a miniature battle was in progress.

CHAPTER XXX.

SOME NEWSPAPER "SCOOPS."

DURING those days Victor Hall's uneasiness of mind was constantly increasing. The fact of Paul Gardner's disappearance from Olluma was public property on the day after he had advised him to go. Everybody seemed simultaneously to have learned his identity and the story of his crime and punishment. The local paper found the affair a mine of great value and the circulation doubled (it was three hundred copies before). A reporter was sent over from Los Angeles, and two from San Francisco, the latter looking with professional hauteur upon the former one, and their feeling being cordially reciprocated.

In the race for news the *Hexameter* came out ahead, by at least a length. A portrait that had at some previous time done duty in that office under another name was dusted off and labelled "Darius Gardner," bearing as much resemblance to that individual as it did to the Sultan of Turkey. A fancy sketch of a villainous-appearing fellow, made "on the spot" by an artist who did not leave the vicinity of the Golden Gate, was made to do duty for "Herbert Brown;" and an old cut of some millionaire's residence at Seattle was used to represent the modest home of the family at Olluma.

An hour and a half after the sheriff and his posse made their flying entrance to the barn at Brayton a spirited picture of the scene was being sold with a full page of lively letter press all the way from the Ferry house to the Panhandle. This was a "scoop" which called forth three columns of editorial boasting and filled all rival sheets with the utmost envy. The *Pall* and the *Comical* each discharged four of their oldest and best men, for having allowed the *Hexameter* to "beat" them; and to avoid the possibility of that disgrace happening again an immense drawing of Paul's final capture was prepared in advance at each of these offices, showing him with a revolver in both hands and a bandana tied in rakish fashion around a head from which blood was streaming; the line "Brought to Bay at Last" being set in large type, with a half column of other heads, all in triple width, descriptive of the mad and profligate life which he had never led. On receipt of the slightest intimation that the criminal was likely to be caught, the news rooms had orders to "run this" and to give directions to have the presses worked at full speed. Even the portraits of "Little Egypt" were to be shelved for the time being and all references to Collis P. Huntington to be set in single leads.

Victor Hall, when the first news arrived, hoped anxiously that some miracle would yet intervene to enable Paul to escape his enemies. He did not call on Marian, as nothing could be gained by an interview with the young woman, and he did not know where to find Elsie. Mr. Gardner called for his customary tip and was greeted with a positive refusal, couched in uncomplimentary

mentary terms which sent him away vowing vengeance. Whiteley had a quarrel with his partner which ended in an announcement by the latter that he would dissolve their connection as soon as the proper papers could be prepared. Morse did not trouble him with any calls, but they met once or twice in the street or at the hotel and exchanged sour glances.

Victor learned to some extent the efforts that Morse was making to bring Paul to "justice" and wished heartily that there was some way he could aid the fugitive. Thus the days passed until the morning after the events described in the last chapter, when he was awakened by a hubbub in the street that told him something unusual had occurred. While dressing he heard a confused number of cries which convinced him that the worst had happened and he descended at last to the ground floor with a heavy heart.

The sheriff and his posse had returned by wagon from Brayton and were surrounded by the biggest crowd ever seen in the local streets. As Hall approached, Mr. Stocker mounted a barrel that somebody rolled out of a yard for the purpose and addressed his "constituents:"

"As there seems to be a general demand," he said, "for a statement of what we have accomplished, I yield to the desires of my friends. ('Good!' and 'Go on!') Last night, learning that the robber of Mr. Morse's safe, who had since escaped from the prison in Illinois, was hidden in a barn near the village of Brayton, I took a force of citizens, sworn in as special officers, and drove there. We surrounded the barn and

began to parley with the occupant, who replied by firing at us with rifles. Having exhausted all hope of capturing him in a peaceful way I took six of my best men and made a rush for the interior. Bullets flew around our heads and we returned the fire, emptying all six chambers of each of our revolvers. Finally we reached the haymow and I saw——”

(“The robber! Hurrah!” yelled fifty voices, while the rest stood speechless at the bravery of their townsmen.)

“I saw a form. Throwing myself upon it I soon, with the aid of the others, had a pair of twisters on his wrists. Then we searched the place thoroughly, leaving the guard outside to prevent any escape, and found——”

(“Hurry up! Don’t spin it out so long!”)

“That the man we sought was not there. He had evidently got word in some way that we were coming and fled before our arrival.”

The sheriff wiped his face and the crowd set up a yell of derision.

“Who did yer catch, then?” asked some one.

“We caught a brother of the escaped prisoner, who had two guns and a pistol, Jacob Gardner of this town. He is now safe in the lock-up.”

All of those present knew the little chap and, when they realized what a small mouse the mountain had brought forth, sarcastic remarks flew from many mouths. The sheriff, who had been overcome with his temporary importance, got off the barrel and retired in no good humor. The reporter of the local paper,

who had been frozen out of the "combination," and had not known of the intended visit to Brayton, laughed in glee at his rivals, who had participated in the inglorious exploit. In the meantime brief wires had been filed for San Francisco at a wayside office and three artists of that city were at work on imaginary portraits of Jakey, picturing him as a villain of the deepest dye, about six feet four inches in height and broad in proportion.

Mr. Hall went from the scene in front of the hotel directly to the lock-up, where the chief of police permitted him to see Master Jacob. The small boy was far from downcast at his incarceration, being in fact quite proud of his importance. He even forgot his old antipathy in his anxiety to relate his version of the affair at the ranch to somebody.

"'Twas de funniest' t'ing yer ever seed," he began, convulsed with laughter. "Paul was gone hours an' hours afore de sheriff come, an' I jes hung on dere ter give him ev'ry minnit I could ter git outer de way. Old Stocker put his head in de door an' I split off a piece of board right side o' his ear. Lordy! how he jumped! I had dat rifle o' yourn, an' my shotgun an' a p'stel, wid enough ammunition fer de Cubin army. Den old Whiteley, he t'ought he'd have more influens, an' he got aroun' de corner whar he t'ought he could shoot his mout' off an' be safe, but I give him a mild reminder an' he was t'rough. One arter another inoder, t'ree or four of de crowd tried de same game an' got 'nough of it. Den Else, she comes an' plays de baby act, but——"

"Elsie! How did she get there?" cried Mr. Hall, much startled.

"Come over from Jones's, where she's stayin', but you didn't know dat, o' co'se. Well, she hollers out, half bawlin', 'I'm yer sister, Paul, an' I knows yer in-nercent, but yer'd better give in; ' an' I didn't shoot dat time, 'cause I was loadin' up fer de gang I knowed was comin' inside. All to wonst I seed Stocker's mug an' den de hull caboodle on 'em. I fired both guns an' de pistel, ev'ry blamed ca'tridge, but I didn't hit nobody. Dey all fired at me, too, an' not one scratched me anywheres. It was an orful waste o' good powder. I didn't care to hold 'em off any longer, fer Paul had got all de start he'd need, so I frew up my han's an' Stocker put de wristers on. Wot does de folks in town say? I'll git my name in the papers all right, won't I?"

There was no evidence that Jacob considered the affair in which he had participated anything more than an amusing incident and Mr. Hall thought it his duty to caution him against talking so freely to any one else. He told him he had broken the law and might have difficulty in escaping a term in jail. His wisest course was to refuse to speak till he had consulted a lawyer and decided on his defence.

"Does yer t'ink dey'll give me a real jail sentence?" replied the boy, in a spasm of joy. "Will dey put me an' Paul in tergedder? Dat *would* be ga-lorious!"

"Paul, if captured, would have to go back to Illinois, and you would do your time here in California," said Hall. "That doesn't seem so attractive, does it?"

"You'd best take my advice, to refuse to speak. A good lawyer may get you off easy, on account of your youth, if you don't spoil the case."

When Mr. Hall left he secured a promise from Jacob to abide by his advice and agreed to send to him a young attorney of the town, named Evans, who could be trusted with at least the initial aspects of his case. Hall wanted very much to see Marian, but he would not run the risk of meeting Morse. He returned to his office, therefore, and worked on some legal papers. When lunch was ready and he was about to go to the hotel, remembering suddenly that he had forgotten to eat any breakfast, Mr. Sewall appeared.

The minister looked grave. He was deeply impressed by the extraordinary occurrences of the preceding twenty hours and wanted to confer with the lawyer about them. Accepting an invitation to take his lunch with Victor he accompanied him to his chamber, where by special order the meal was served. The dining room had too many ears for what he wished to say.

"It's a terrible thing," he remarked, when the door was closed behind them. "That reckless boy, Jacob, came very near making a murderer of himself last night. His brother is again fleeing from his pursuers. The elder sister is plunged in grief, and the younger one as unhappy as I can conceive it possible for a girl to be."

"You know where she is, then?" said Hall.

"Yes. She went in my charge to the barn when the trouble occurred and I took her back to her friends, when her efforts proved of no avail. They are caring

for her now with all the tenderness imaginable, but she has had too much to bear for one so sensitive and young. Mr. Hall, have you ever thought of Elsie Gardner other than as a friend?"

The question was asked in such a solemn way that the lawyer realized the meaning it must have. With the diplomacy of his profession he mastered himself and only answered, "Why?"

"She is a beautiful little lady—a pearl beyond price—a jewel any gentleman might be happy and proud to wear for his own."

"Mr. Sewall! You love her!"

The minister shook his head decidedly.

"No. But, if you will excuse my candor, I wonder that she never affected you with that passion, thrown in her company as you have been."

The door opened and the waiter brought in the table cloth and other preliminaries of the meal that was being prepared. His advent was a real relief to Mr. Hall, for it enabled him to master his emotions to a certain degree.

When they were again alone he faced Mr. Sewall with a white countenance.

"I don't know that I ought to say this," he told him; "but I care more for Elsie Gardner than for anything else on earth!"

"And yet you are going to marry Gertrude Felton!"

"I am not sure—I am struggling now—I have been for a long time—with that question."

The minister was evidently nonplussed. He sat for some time in silence.

"Have you ever spoken to Elsie of your love?" he asked.

"Never."

"Then she has not refused to listen to it."

Mr. Hall shook his head, pressing his hands nervously together.

"Won't you tell me why?"

"I will give you one reason, and then, I beg you, let us drop the subject. She is in love with another man."

"I assure you that is a mistake!" cried the minister.

"It is true. Her father told me so. Now let us talk of the brothers. Is there anything we can do to aid Paul? We must try our best to keep him again from the clutches of the law. If he is apprehended we must move Heaven and earth to secure his freedom. I have already seen Jakey at the police station and have sent Mr. Evans to confer with him. I think, if the lawyer plays his points right, considering the extreme youth of the boy, he can escape sentence. Now, Mr. Sewall, there is something else that I wish you to hear and in which you can do me a service."

"Anything that lies in my power."

"I have not felt easy over the large profits I have made from the mine on the Gardner place. Although I was innocent of the scheme by which it was taken from them, I wish to restore it to their possession. I mean to estimate the amount of money I have personally had from it and turn that over, with my half of the stock, to the children. Will you accept this trust for me?"

The minister was much surprised. He said a thing of this kind should be considered with great care. Besides, in turning over all his share of the stock, Mr. Hall would give away, not only what he might think belonged to the Gardner place but his previous investment with it.

"That is exactly what I shall do," said Victor, sighing. "I am going East to live and I want them to have it all. Then when Elsie—he paused, drawing a long breath—marries, she will have a dowry worthy of her goodness and beauty. Say you will act for me, my friend."

"I will think of it, but I know you are in error in supposing Elsie has an admirer such as you describe. If there is any man she loves, Mr. Hall, it is yourself. Ask her for her hand and prove my words true."

"I never can do that," was the sad reply.

CHAPTER XXXI.

"KINDLY EXAMINE THESE PAPERS."

THE relations between the partners of Whiteley & Hall had become very much strained by this time. The two men were hardly on speaking terms and only held such communications as were absolutely necessary in closing up their business. Hall resented bitterly the action of Whiteley in joining in the pursuit of Paul Gardner and was hurt by the constant proofs that he was hand in glove with Morse, who, though disappointed, was not discouraged and kept up his efforts.

It was certainly a peculiar situation: The owner of the property taken at Stromberg four years before was doing his best to aid the supposed thief, while the trustee was trying to restore the bonds to a man who did not want them recovered. One was influenced to a certain extent by sentiment, the other wanted to redeem his reputation in the eyes of the world.

The legal document which would turn over half of the stock in the mining company to Mr. Sewall, as representing the Gardner heirs, was finally completed, as well as other papers necessary to the new move Mr. Hall had decided to make. Then a telegram

was sent to Cyrus Keith, saying, "I need you greatly. Come as soon as you can to Olluma."

In the meantime Paul had reached a distant point where, thinking himself safe from immediate danger, he wrote a letter to Marian. This letter was handed to Mr. Gardner at the postoffice, one day, when he was in a particularly thirsty condition and angry with every one, Mr. Hall especially, for the hard fate which prevented him from satisfying his absorbing appetite for liquor. Although the envelope bore an unfamiliar hand the old man guessed who had sent it and, concluding that an opportunity to make an honest dollar had presented itself, went straight to Mr. Morse.

"There's a reward offered for that wicked son of mine, ain't there?" he asked.

"Five hundred dollars by the State of Illinois and \$500 more that I am willing to pay out of my own pocket."

"If a man put you onto the right trail would he git that money?"

"He would at least get a share of it. I would give a hundred dollars on the spot for a good clue."

There was something horrible in the scheme that was visible in the cunning face of this depraved father, but the time for splitting hairs had passed.

"He's been an ondutiful son," said Mr. Gardner, as if to justify the deed he contemplated. "He's brought disgrace on a respectable and honorable family. I don't think he's entitled to any consideration from me."

"You know where he is, then?" asked Morse, with bated breath.

"You'll give me the hundred, if I show you—and say nothing to nobody?"

An eager affirmative was at once given to the proposition. Mr. Gardner, with shaking fingers, tore open the envelope and, after reading the letter within, handed it to the other man. The money was paid, promises of mutual secrecy exchanged, and a few minutes later a dispatch was on the wires directed to the authorities of Sacramento, where the young man was in hiding. Mr. Gardner went straight to the nearest bar and got intoxicated. He also took home with him a flask of liquor and for several days indulged his beastly proclivities to his heart's content.

Olluma was thrown into a ferment one morning by the news that the much-wanted criminal was again in custody. It had been arranged that he was to be brought back to that town and an effort made there to obtain a confession of the whereabouts of the stolen bonds, before he was delivered up to the Illinois authorities.

Marian heard of the capture and, braving the anger of her husband, went to call on Hall.

"They've caught poor Paul and are going to bring him here," she said, wringing her hands. "Oh, what can we do?"

"I don't know. All I can say is, I shall use my utmost efforts in his behalf. I have made some—some discoveries—which I think will secure his pardon, even if he has to be returned first to prison."

"Discoveries?" she cried. "You have learned who was the real thief?"

"I think so."

"He ought to be severely punished, after all the injustice he has permitted to be done," she said, excitedly.

"Yes; he ought to suffer as much, if that can be, as he has caused others to suffer."

Marian's spirits rose. She said the first thing Paul must be told when he arrived was the glorious news. That would enable him to bear his temporary incarceration with more patience. The girl laughed through her tears and began to see only the bright side of the case.

Excusing himself on the plea of urgent business, Mr. Hall bowed her out, which he had hardly done when Mr. Keith presented himself, having lost no time in responding to the call.

The meeting between the old friends was affectionate in the extreme, and when the first greetings were over Mr. Hall locked himself in a private room with the new comer and had a long and deeply interesting conversation with him. Before this was finished an officer who had, unknown to Keith, come with Paul on the same train, appeared in the outer office, accompanied by his prisoner, Mr. Morse and Mr. Whiteley.

The quartet entered the third room of the suite occupied by the law firm—the room in which "Mason Harvey" had so long acted as clerk, and there began

their efforts to secure information as to the disposal Paul had made of the missing securities.

"You might as well own up," they said to him, one after another, in various forms of language. "Your escape will naturally be treated as a new offence, and unless you make restitution you are likely to get five years more added to your unexpired sentence. Give up what you took and we will all do our best to secure your early release."

The young man wore a haggard look and for a long time refused to make the least reply to the coaxing suggestions. It was the hope of his inquisitors to break him down from sheer exhaustion and they kept at their task. With a refinement of ingenuity the officer had offered him no breakfast that morning, and as he was actually faint with hunger and weariness. When it seemed as if he would refuse to speak, notwithstanding all their efforts, Whiteley hit by accident on a key that opened the closed mouth.

"Think what suffering you have caused," he said, impressively, "to those who love you. Mr. Hall has made arrangements to dissolve his partnership with me and sacrifice his business prospects in California, because he cannot bear to stay and witness the disgrace of those he esteems so highly. Your sister Elsie has already found it necessary to seek another home, because she has learned that the man to whom she had given the love of her innocent heart is the one whose life you blighted. Restore what you took from him, give back happiness to your family by doing

an honest act, and when you are released from imprisonment, begin a new life of probity."

Whiteley would have stopped at no deception to accomplish his purpose. He had learned, through Mr. Morse, of the reason that sent Elsie to Brayton, and he threw that into the scale, although he knew Mr. Hall was pledged to Oscar Felton's daughter. The effect, to his joy, was instantaneous.

"Leave me here for half an hour," said Paul, huskily. "I want to think. Oh, you can guard the building," he added, as he saw the quick eyes of the officer light up with doubt. "There is only the door and one window to watch."

The officer was not sure he ought to leave the young man out of his sight, even under these conditions, but the other persuaded him. It seemed to them that the time was near at hand, if it would ever come, for the clearing up of the great mystery. Presently Paul was left alone, and no one objected when he turned the key in the door behind them.

The trio sat down and talked in whispers, looking often at their watches and listening for any sound that might come from the inner room they had vacated. They could occasionally hear Mr. Hall speaking on the other side of the partition, but they did not know who was closeted with him, nor, of course, the subject that seemed to engross them so thoroughly. It was a dreary wait, but the hope that had entered their minds served to make it bearable; and at last, when the full half hour was over, the officer tapped

lightly on the door behind which his prisoner was staying.

The key turned and Paul admitted them. As they looked inquiringly at his unshaven face they saw that a new expression had come into the weary eyes and a new erectness to the bent form they had left. He looked, not like a prisoner being baited and badgered, but like a man among men, who had terms to give to others. He was actually handsome at that moment.

"Well?" they asked in one breath.

"If Mr. Roads, the officer, will go with me to my old lodging room," said Paul without a tremor, "I will give him what you want."

Although they had hoped for something of this sort, all three of the men were overcome with surprise at the straightforwardness of the statement.

"You will surrender the stolen securities?" asked Mr. Roads.

"Every one."

"You had better not go alone," whispered Morse to the officer, too excited almost to enunciate the words.

"Have no fear," was the reply. "I know my business."

"I will do what you ask," added Roads, to Paul. "Excuse me for attaching this bracelet to your wrist and to mine. You have taken at last the sensible course and I renew my promise to do all I can to make it easy for you."

The carriage in which the party had come was waiting below, surrounded by a gaping crowd, which was

prevented from ascending the stairs by two men in uniform. As Roads caught sight of the assemblage he asked Paul if he wished to tie a handkerchief across his face, so as to be less conspicuous to those who had known him.

"Not at all. I am doing nothing I am ashamed of," was the proud reply, and the young man straightened himself to his full height. As he walked down the stairs and to the carriage he looked much more like an arresting officer than like a prisoner in custody. "He's braving it out," said one to another.

Whiteley and Morse sat in the office, awaiting the return of the pair who had gone. They spoke in low tones occasionally, as if in attendance at a funeral. Sometimes they moved uneasily, at a noise outside or a movement in the room where Hall and his friend Keith were closeted. Whiteley remarked that it was lucky they had fixed this thing without his partner having a chance to interfere and Morse nodded an agreement. Finally the inner door opened and the occupants of that room appeared.

"How do you do, Mr. Morse?" said Keith, with some constraint, at the same time offering his hand.

"You are too early with your courtesies," was the sharp retort. "I do not care to shake hands with anybody from Stromberg just yet."

Mr. Keith colored, but preserved his good nature.

"I will admit, Mr. Morse," he said, "that, in common with some others of your townsmen, I have done you an injustice in my thoughts. I rejoice that you

will soon have it in your power to prove your innocence to those who have mistaken you."

Mr. Hall stood back a little, listening, with his gaze on the door. Mr. Morse looked at the two stupefied. Was there an aperture between the room in which they had sat and this one, that they had successfully played the part of eavesdroppers? He was about to ask what Mr. Keith meant by his expressions when the sound of steps on the front stairs was heard, and Paul Gardner, still erect and proud, entered the room manacled as before to Officer Roads. In the young man's free hand was an oblong package, about ten by three inches in size, tied with blue tape. At sight of the men and the package Mr. Hall sprang backward and caught at a desk for support.

"Mr. Morse," came the strong, clear voice of the prisoner, "will you kindly examine these papers and see if they are the ones you lost?"

While the insurance agent was untying the tape with trembling fingers, Mr. Keith supported Mr. Hall with his arm and assisted him to a chair, besides bringing him a glass of water, which he sipped feverishly. But Mr. Keith's attention could not be kept long from the strange scene going on at the other side of the room. With undisguised astonishment he heard Mr. Morse verify the contents of the package, piece by piece, and announce that everything taken from him was there.

"I shall have to retain this for the present," said Roads, doing it up roughly and thrusting it into his pocket. "And now, gentlemen, let me congratulate you, and say good-by."

Mr. Hall staggered to his feet as the officer and his prisoner reached the outer door and gasped the one word, "Paul!" He was too weak to stand, however, Mr. Keith sympathetically helped him to his chair again.

"Might I ask you, gentlemen, to leave us for a few minutes," he said to the others, appealingly. "He is very ill."

Without an oral reply Whiteley accompanied Morse into the corridor.

"Courage!" whispered Keith to the nearly inanimate figure in the chair. "Don't give up like this."

Victor looked up at his friend with wandering gaze.

"Did you see him? Did he have that package and give it to Morse—or was I dreaming?"

Ten minutes later, supported on one side by Mr. Keith, and on the other by a hackman who had been summoned, Hall was led slowly down the stairs and driven to the hotel.

"Don't seem to like his medicine, does he?" remarked Whiteley to his confederate, with a grin.

CHAPTER XXXII.

AN ELABORATE CONFESSION.

HON. JOHN M. TANNER, Governor of Illinois, found among his mail within a week after the restoration of the stolen papers to Mr. Morse, the following peculiar and highly interesting documents. They were interesting even to a Governor who had many strange things come before him, and were read through twice with care before they were laid aside for action :

To the Hon. John M. Tanner, Governor:—Respectfully represents the undersigned that it has come to his knowledge that one Paul Gardner, passing also by the name of “Herbert Brown,” who was convicted under the latter name of larceny, at a term of court held at Stromberg, on the 14th day of ———, 1895, and sentenced to a term of five years in the State Prison at Joliet, is wholly innocent of that crime. Now, therefore, your petitioner, both for himself and for his client, Victor Hall, for some time past a resident of the State of California, but formerly of Stromberg, and whose affidavit, setting forth his own guilt in the matter of said larceny and the entire innocence of said Gardner, alias Brown, is hereto annexed, prays that said Gardner, alias Brown, be set at liberty, and that an early hearing be given in the matter.

And your petitioner will ever pray. (Signed)

CYRUS KEITH, Attorney-at-Law.

Stromberg, Oct. —, 1898.

Affidavit of Victor Hall: The undersigned, Victor Hall, formerly of Stromberg in the State of Illinois, but more recently of Olluma in the State of California, makes oath as follows:

In the year 1890 one Martha Hall, mother of said Victor, deceased at said Stromberg, leaving in trust for said Victor certain funds to the value (approximately) of \$40,000, constituting one Richard A. Morse as trustee and executor of her estate. By the terms of said will the said Morse was to retain custody of said funds until the said Victor was thirty years of age, paying him only the income until that time. Said Morse entered upon the performance of the trust aforesaid, giving no bonds, as provided by said will, for the faithful discharge of said duties, and thereafter, until the 27th day of November, 1895, as deponent says and now believes, acted as an honest and wise guardian of said trust funds, carrying out the provisions of said will according to law.

And the said Hall deposes that in the month of November, in the year 1895, he became possessed with the conviction that the securities held in trust for him by said Morse were not in honest and safe hands, and was much troubled in his mind over the danger which he imagined said trust estate was in; and being convinced, after much mental worry, that he was likely to be a sufferer from the probable (as he believed) danger to his rights in the case, and that an application to the court having jurisdiction would result in a refusal to have another trustee appointed in whom he, the said Hall, might have full confidence, your deponent hastily conceived a plan by which he might gain possession of said securities so held in trust for him by the said Morse in advance of the time said property would be legally due and payable into his hands. Having been permitted to examine the said securities

representing said trust property, and observing that they were kept in a package, the outer wrapper of which was of a certain style of wrapping paper and tied with blue tape, your deponent says that he prepared a package intended to look as nearly as possible like the one in which said securities were kept, and on being permitted again to examine the true package in the office of said Morse, did then and there substitute the false package for the true one, and did take and carry away surreptitiously the said securities of which the said Morse was legal custodian and trustee for your deponent.

And the said Hall further says that after gaining possession as aforesaid of said securities, which at the time, in his excited state of mind, he fully believed himself justified in doing, on the principle that one should protect his rights at all hazards against imminent danger, he removed on the following day from the State of Illinois, and soon after took up his residence in the State of California, carrying the said property with him; and that to no person did he mention or intimate in any way that he had taken said property as aforesaid, but retained possession of said securities in the original form in which he took them until the third day of October, last past.

And your deponent also says that he had no information that the taking of said package was charged as a crime to one Paul Gardner, alias Brown, until the summer of the present year; that he supposed the only result of his act would be to secure himself in possession of his mother's estate in advance of the legal time; and that he believed himself justified to his own conscience in the unusual action he had taken in the matter. It has recently come to his knowledge, however, that a clerk in the office of the said Morse, whose true name is Paul Gardner, but who was then passing under the name of "Herbert Brown," having been the only person, according to the evidence presented, who

had a knowledge of the combination by which a certain safe in said office, in which said papers were usually kept, could be opened, was arrested, indicted, tried and sentenced to the term of five years in the State Prison for the larceny of said securities, and that the said Gardner, although a totally innocent person as regards said offence, is now undergoing punishment therefor in the prison aforesaid.

And your deponent says that he and he alone is guilty of the abstraction of said property and that said Gardner, alias Brown, had no knowledge of your deponent's act or reason to believe the true facts in the case.

And said Hall further deposes that he is now and will continue to remain as long as may be necessary to further the ends of justice and do right by the said Gardner, within the limits of the State of Illinois, to wit, at the Palmer House in the City of Chicago, and will be ready and willing at any time to appear for examination by your Excellency or any court or person designated by you, to substantiate the allegations of this deposition.

Wherefore he, the said Hall, prays that your Excellency will give speedy attention to this matter, that an end may be put to the incarceration of the said innocent Paul Gardner.

(Signed) VICTOR HALL.

Subscribed and sworn to before me, this — day of October, in the year 1898, at Stromberg.

CYRUS KEITH, Notary Public.

Mr. Keith took a journey to Springfield, secured an interview with Gov. Tanner without much delay, and talked the matter over with him at length. By his request a communication was dictated to the warden of the State Prison to treat Gardner with all possible

leniency consistent with his safe custody until the case was disposed of.

"What does Mr. Hall expect will be done with himself when he has secured the release of Gardner?" asked the Governor.

"He will leave that entirely to the courts. He realizes that he has been the cause of great suffering to innocent people and declares he will make no defence except to represent the circumstances exactly as they are."

"He almost wants to take Gardner's place in prison?" said the Governor, with a slight smile.

"I really believe he does. The revelation of the misery his act has caused has much unnerved him. He fears also that an affidavit unsupported by his presence would not be sufficient. Representing him I can say that he is entirely ready to take whatever punishment it is decided he deserves."

"It will break up his life and ruin his career," mused the Governor.

"I am afraid so, but he is determined. And I would not like the responsibility of coming between a man and his convictions of right."

Mr. Hall stayed at Chicago, because he wanted to be where he could easily be called, and did not like to face the people of Stromberg, day after day, while this matter was waiting to be adjudicated. He wrote a letter to Paul in his prison, telling what he had done and expressing the greatest regret at the suffering which had fallen on the young man. He alluded to his attempt to effect a partial restoration of the Gardner ranch, not as

if it ought to affect Paul's feelings toward him, but that he might have the satisfaction of knowing that he would not be penniless when released from bondage.

Mr. Morse came back to Stromberg, with his head high in the air. To those who expressed congratulations he replied in a manner that was curt and haughty. The injuries he had endured had burned deep into his soul. His main idea now was to punish Mr. Hall, and he engaged able counsel to represent him in the proceedings that were to take place. In spite of Hall's attitude he feared he would not carry out his announced intentions unless forced. He wanted to see him behind the bars, with the stripes of a convict on him. One day he received this letter from the object of his wrath:

Richard A. Morse, Esq.—Dear Sir: As you have undoubtedly been at some pecuniary loss on account of my actions in relation to the bonds you held in trust for me, and which will naturally be returned to you, I wish to make over to you absolutely the entire property. This I do from a conviction that it will no more than compensate for what you have endured, and because I have suffered such mental distress that I prefer not to see them again.

Very truly yours,

VICTOR HALL.

Mr. Morse sneered audibly as he finished reading this epistle.

"He's crawfishing," he muttered. "But he don't get around me by any such trick. He got to do time; that's what he deserves and I'll see it's what he gets. As for the trusteeship it will be carried out according to the terms of his mother's will. I shall take for my

services just what the law allows and no more. He'd like to lower me again in the estimation of my fellow townsmen, but he's taken the wrong way to do it."

Another letter was written and mailed about this time, which read as follows:

Miss Elsie:—Can you endure a few lines from one who, though he little realized what he was doing at the time, has caused much harm to you and yours? I make no defence; I have no intention of asking for a pardon I do not deserve. I only beg, if you can grant me that favor, out of the kindness of your heart, that you will let me know the date your marriage is to take place, that I may send some little souvenir. We were good friends once.

V. H.

When notice came that the Governor was ready to hear Mr. Keith's petition, Mr. Hall went to Springfield and assisted in presenting the case. Even Morse could find no fault with his manner of doing so, but when the pardon was directed to issue he asked that Hall be detained and bound over for trial. He expressed his fear that the confessed criminal would not be found when next wanted, but no attention was paid to his statements. He had the unpleasant experience, instead, of hearing murmurs of admiration and approval follow Victor, from the people present at the hearing.

"Gad, but that's moral courage!" said one man, expressing the views of all about him.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

AN AUSTRIAN BARONESS.

AMONG the people especially interested in the remarkable move that Mr. Hall had made was Oscar Felton and his daughter. They had realized from the brief and unenthusiastic letters he had sent them, as well as from his constrained manner before their departure, that he was not enthusiastic over the nuptials they were trying to persuade him to celebrate. Both had hoped, however, that time would bring everything around to their liking and had tried to await that happy day with patience. When the papers began to be filled with accounts of his confession the news came like a chilling wave to both father and daughter.

Gertrude's sentiments underwent a decided change when she contemplated the possibility of waiting years for a fiancé who could only come to her arms at last from a felon's cell. Her love was not proof against the new order of things; and her father, who had encouraged her infatuation for Victor because it seemed the surest way to save her from an early grave, was not sorry to observe that she heard his name with a clouded brow and that apprehension was giving way to indignation.

About the same time—as if to help matters out—

an Austrian baron, who had come to the United States for the purpose of bestowing his title on some eligible young woman with a suitable fortune, made a second visit to Stromberg. Learning the condition of affairs he began again to pay Gertrude marked attention. She was flattered to find herself the envied one among her social set, and when the baron renewed his proposal in a formal manner and she saw a European court in prospect, she came to the conclusion that her path was clear.

Victor Hall's image had gradually faded from her girlish heart. She was willing to leave a town in which she had known her heaviest disappointment and excite at the same time the little world in which she moved. Mr. Felton was glad to have the troubled seas of her life settled so pleasantly. And although she was not able to converse with her admirer in his own language, nor he with her in hers, they managed by the aid of what French she knew (and an interpreter) to exchange vows and to arrange the terms of a marriage settlement.

The little preliminary of breaking off the fiction of an engagement with Mr. Hall was easily arranged. Mr. Felton wrote to Victor that he thought his present attitude inexcusable and that his confession of theft had disgraced him sufficiently to warrant a severance of all ties between him and his daughter. Quite as much relieved as Gertrude, Mr. Hall responded in the next mail that he would consider the affair ended and that he wished his late fiancée all future happiness.

Paul Gardner, who was provided with necessary funds now to travel in a comfortable manner, lost no time in returning to California, where his sisters were anxiously awaiting him. He found Elsie in much distress over the impending punishment of Mr. Hall, who had, she thought, fully expiated his fault, considering all the circumstances. In this view of the matter Paul and Marian entirely agreed with her, the former being abundantly willing, as far as he was concerned, to forgive the unhappy man. It was evident to all three that Mr. Hall's action was caused in the first place by an apparently well grounded fear that he was about to lose his inheritance; and in trying to right his wrong, as soon as he discovered it, he had disarmed resentment.

Marian had suffered with the rest from the terrible error that had been made, for her married life hung by a slender thread, which might break at any time. She would not hear a word, however, in criticism of her husband, who was actuated, she said, by his idea of absolute justice and had endured great trials. She wrote to him often, begging him to join with the others who had been injured, forgetting the past, but no answer came. Mr. Morse fancied that nothing less than legal penalties would balance the account against the author of his disgrace.

Mr. Evans, the lawyer who undertook the defence of Master Jacob, succeeded in getting that young gentleman admitted to bail in a reasonable sum, which was easily procured, and later in having his case placed on file. It was argued to the district court that Jacob

was too young to understand the offence with which he had been charged, and had only, at the most, fired some random shots in the air, when he found himself in danger of assault from a mob whose intentions he had no means of knowing, except that they were antagonistic. No one had been hurt, at any rate, and to prosecute this little fellow seriously, for holding at bay a dozen strong men headed by a sheriff, would only result in belittling the authorities in the eyes of the public.

The boy was solemnly warned, however, by the judge, to "turn over a new leaf" and told that in case he was ever arrested in the future this offence would be remembered against him. He came out of the ordeal somewhat sobered and, after receiving a large quantity of good advice from his brother, whom he fairly adored, relinquished his old intention of adopting the profession of a footpad, and devoted himself with ardor to his schoolbooks. The principal difficulty thus far has been to induce him to adopt the language usually spoken by respectable people in the United States, and abandon the slang to which he has clung, but he is gradually accomplishing even this feat.

Mr. Sewall, after long thought and many consultations with the Gardners, accepted the trusteeship of the shares Mr. Hall had owned in the gold mine. It was feared that unless he did so Mr. Whiteley might succeed in absorbing the whole of it, which his actions led them to believe he would not be above doing. When all the troubles were

lightened out, it would be easy to give the property back to the rightful owner, if they could persuade him to accept it. With a competent representative to look after their interests the mine continued to prove a profitable institution and Mr. Hall's interests were fully protected.

A sad thing was the necessity that soon developed of placing the father of the family in a home for dipsomaniacs. The money he had received from Mr. Morse enabled him to go on such a prolonged debauch that for the time he completely lost his reason and had to be restrained. It is only necessary to dismiss this unpleasant subject by saying that the unfortunate man survived his incarceration but a few months.

As soon as Paul had attended to necessary business in the West he returned to Illinois and had several interviews with Mr. Hall, whom he tried to persuade to flee from the danger that hung over him. Victor was firm. Not only had he given his word to the Governor at the time he applied for Paul's release, but he would never be satisfied until he had done something to expiate his offences. He was much interested to know how Paul had obtained possession of the bonds which he had surrendered and Paul told him the entire story.

"I had seen that package in your safe," said he, "several times when you came to open it. The similarity of the size and tapes to the one I was accused of stealing impressed me greatly. Still I could form no idea for a long time why you should have taken it yourself, and at last when I began to comprehend your

real reason—as it was afterwards explained by you—I did not like to put you in jeopardy if I could help it, for what did not seem like a real larceny. You were kind to me, you had been like a brother to my sisters. I saw the package several times and grew surer that it was the one I believed, but I meant to use that knowledge only in the event that I was again arrested and could find no other way to establish my innocence.

“With the importance of that bundle of bonds constantly in my mind I found myself observing with care the manner in which you unlocked that safe. It was not a difficult matter to fix your movements in my memory, and one day after the office was closed for business I proved my guess correct by opening the door, taking out the package and verifying my suspicions. Then came your warning of my danger from Mr. Morse, your loan of money for my flight, and some things Jakey told me while we were going to our hiding place in the old barn. I made up my mind I would rather be sent back to Joliet and serve out my term than to expose you. Mr. Roads left me in that room for half an hour, to decide whether I would ‘confess’ where the missing property was or take the extreme penalty of the law. I quietly opened the safe, put the package under my vest, and locked it again. When they called me and asked for my decision I made Roads go to the house where I had roomed and pretended to find the bonds there. If you had not spoiled my plan I would now be finishing my sentence in prison, with perhaps a year additional, and you would be the same respected citizen of Olluma you were before.”

Mr. Hall listened with deep interest and sighed audibly when the narrative was finished.

"And you would have stayed in prison, disgraced, convicted, suffering, while I breathed the fresh air of heaven and retained the esteem of my townsmen—I the guilty, you the innocent man!"

"I wish you had left it so," replied Paul, earnestly. "And, as it is too late now for that, I beg you not to make useless all I have tried to do. I look on your act in taking those securities as a venial matter. You have done all you can to right those who were wronged. If you persist in refusing to escape punishment you will yield to a morbid sentiment which no one will endorse, besides giving further pain to friends who love you—my sisters and myself."

Mr. Hall lowered his head, trying to conceal his overpowering emotion.

"They are too kind, as well as you," he stammered at last. "I hope when I have donned the felon's stripes that belong to me, Marian will be restored to the husband my conduct has estranged from her, and that—your—other sister"—(he had tried to pronounce the name, that 'stuck in his throat' like the 'amen' in Macbeth) "will make some good man happy."

There are times when it is unwise to be squeamish and Paul Gardner thought this was one of them.

"I have learned," he said, "that you misunderstood something Mannie said to you about Elsie. She is not engaged to marry anybody, she has not even the slightest thought in that direction. She showed me

your letter to her, in which you spoke of her coming wedding, and together we puzzled out the way you came to that conclusion.

He caught at the straw like a drowning man, but immediately relinquished it. No, it would not bear his weight.

"It was not altogether what Marian said, though I thought I understood what she meant when she told me her sister had 'an affection of the heart.' It was your father. He told me in so many words that the child was ill from love, when she went to Brayton."

Paul leaned toward the speaker and spoke impressively.

"For a man with two good eyes you are the blindest of human beings."

Then fearing that he had said too much, he rose, and stating that he would call again soon, took a hasty departure.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

“MAY I SPEAK, YOUR HONOR?”

VICTOR waited patiently for the next session, at which he expected an indictment would be found against him for grand larceny, but when the list of presentments appeared in the newspapers he was surprised—even disappointed—not to discover his name. Like the Apostle, he was “ready to be offered.” He felt that every hour his punishment was postponed delayed the time when he could look the world in the face as a man who had paid the penalty of his offence.

After talking the matter over with Keith, who came to Chicago to see him, he decided on his course of action. Going to Stromberg he walked into the local police station and told the astonished captain there, who had known him from boyhood, that he wanted to be locked up.

“I don’t understand you,” replied the captain. “Your case was considered by the grand jury and they found no bill. That clears you, apparently.”

“No grand jury can clear a guilty man,” replied Victor, impressively. “Three years ago I stole securities valued at \$40,000 from Richard A. Morse of this town. I carried those securities into a distant part of the country and retained possession of them until last

autumn. I am ready to stand trial, and you have no right, Capt. Love, to refuse me that privilege. I surrender myself into custody. You are obliged to take me in charge.'

The captain did not like the situation. He excused himself for a few minutes, during which he used the telephone in his office to communicate with Cyrus Keith, with Richard Morse, and even with Gov. Tanner. When he returned to the waiting man he asked him to follow him and, apologizing to the last moment, showed him into a cell in the rear of the office.

"I comply with your request, Mr. Hall, under protest," said he. "I will have a bondsman here in half an hour who will give bail for your appearance when wanted, after which you will be again at liberty. I was appointed to the police force by your father, when he was mayor, and this proceeding goes against me, I assure you."

Mr. Hall sat down on an iron bedstead that made part of the furniture of his new home and drew a long breath.

"This is the first contented moment I have known for years," he replied. "I shall refuse to accept bail, so you will only waste time if you make a move in that direction. Can't you see, man, that the greatest kindness you can show is to help me pay the debt I owe society? Take me into court, let my friends see I am not afraid to accept the consequences of my folly, put nothing between me and the prison I deserve. I only ask one favor of you: Don't admit any reporters, nor any one else, unless it be Mr. Keith."

Murmuring that he would take notice of the request, though he should never feel that his friend was wise in his present movement, Capt. Love turned the key in the massive lock and walked with heavy tread back to his desk. A few minutes later Mr. Keith called, but on hearing what Victor had said, went away again. He knew the state of the prisoner's mind and did not think it best to interfere.

Of course the local newspapers had a broadside on the matter that evening and when Victor was placed in the dock of the local court the next morning the room was crowded to suffocation. A formal complaint which had been prepared by one of the lieutenants (Capt. Love was determined his name should not appear on that, at least) was read and Hall responded in a firm voice that he plead guilty. As the matter was beyond the jurisdiction of the magistrate the defendant was bound over in the sum of \$500 for his appearance at the Circuit court, though there were murmurs of disapprobation from many in the throng of sightseers, who thought he should be discharged on the spot, notwithstanding his plea.

"May I speak a word, your Honor?" asked Hall, rising in his place.

"Certainly," responded the judge.

"Then I protest against the amount of bail that your Honor has ordered. I stole \$40,000 from Richard Morse. My bail should not be less than twice the sum."

"But the stolen property has been returned," said the judge, smiling.

"That is true, your Honor. But the slight bail which has been ordered is an indication of a tendency to minimize a great offence. If the amount was five dollars instead of five hundred I should not permit any one to offer it. Won't your Honor place the sum at such a figure that my crime will seem the heinous thing it is in the eyes of people who are disposed to regard it lightly? I ask this, not on my own account, but for the influence it will have on men disposed to imitate my error."

Mr. Morse, who had sat uneasily among the spectators, rose at this juncture and essayed to speak, but was speedily suppressed by an officer, who demanded order in the court. The judge replied to Mr. Hall that the amount of bail he had mentioned would stand and the prisoner was taken to the county jail.

These facts the members of the Gardner family who still lived in the little home at Olluma learned, partly through newspapers and partly by a long letter that Mr. Keith took the pains to send them. There was a conference between Paul and his sisters, at which it was decided that all should make a trip to Illinois, including even Jakey, who was delighted with the prospect of seeing the world. Mr. Sewall, on learning of the plan, asked and readily obtained permission to make one of the party, and, six weeks after Victor had been committed, they were registered at a quiet hotel in Chicago. There Mr. Keith came to meet them and, a few days later Mr. Morse was persuaded to hold an interview with his wife.

It was Marian's devotion that finally won the day,

as far as her husband was concerned. Morse had had time to let a little of his anger toward Victor cool. The spectacle of the young man awaiting eagerly the punishment due his crime, his absolute refusal to allow anything in mitigation, his reiterated expressions of contrition and of a desire to make every restitution in his power to those he had wronged, began to penetrate even the hard heart of the insurance man. Besides this, Morse realized that nothing could fully restore the happiness of his married relations but a concession of some kind on his part. He gave in, little by little, to his wife's arguments and they came at last to mutual ground.

"Mr. Hall," she said, "will have been incarcerated nearly three months when the time of his trial comes. He asks and expects nothing from you but bitter opposition. You have a grand opportunity to prove that only love of justice has actuated you and not mere revenge. Paul, who was kept from contact with free men for more than two years, is willing to call his account settled. Richard, cannot you be as magnanimous as he?"

Elsie begged to be allowed to visit the man she adored in his prison, but the others advised against attempting to obtain his permission. She found comfort, however, in the news that her brother-in-law had agreed to take the side of mercy. The attitude of the men who had been wronged must have a powerful influence on the sentence of the court. Keith came and expressed his certainty that the Governor would not

permit any excessive sentence to stand, if worse came to worst.

Thus the time passed till Victor stood again in a dock, pleading guilty with erect form and firm voice before a crowded assemblage, that included Morse and Marian and Elsie, and even the irrepressible small brother.

"Are you represented by counsel?" inquired the clerk of Victor, when the plea was duly recorded.

"I am not nor do I wish to be," was the distinct reply. "I am guilty as charged in the indictment and only wish the court to hear the exact facts of my case."

The first witness called was Richard Morse, who told (reluctantly now) the story of his connection with the Hall estate and his discovery that the bonds he held in trust were missing. He gave an account of the way he had been led to suspect Paul Gardner of the theft and detailed the arrest, trial and conviction of that young man, as well as his pursuit of the escaped prisoner and the final delivery of the securities back into his hands in the office of Whiteley & Hall at Olluma.

"When did you first suspect that the prisoner at the bar was the real culprit?" was asked him.

"Not until I had read in the newspapers the affidavit he sent to the Governor."

"Then you have no personal knowledge that he stole those papers?" interrupted the judge.

"Nothing but that confession and the evidence he gave against himself in the lower court."

The judge asked if the prosecution had any other witnesses they desired to call and was informed that

they had none. The plea of guilty that the defendant had entered made it unnecessary to take up the time.

Victor then asked to be allowed to take the stand, where the oath was at once administered to him.

"May I state the facts, in my own way?" he asked, and when permission was given, he leaned on the rail and, to a breathless and silent audience, told his story:

"Your Honor: Three years ago I was a respected citizen of Stromberg, never dreaming of any other life than that of an honest and upright man. My father had been during his lifetime mayor of the town. I had received a good education and had, I may say without boasting, as many friends as the average young man. Richard A. Morse held in trust for me property to the amount of about \$40,000, which, by the provisions of my mother's will, he was to retain till I was thirty years of age, paying me in the meantime only the income. I became possessed with a conviction (I state it now with shame and regret, for I know it was wholly unwarranted) that he meant to embezzle this property and that when the time came it was payable to me he would not hand it over. This impression grew in my brain until it became a mania. I believed I was likely to be swindled of all I owned and tried to invent some means of outwitting the man I thought meant to do me wrong.

"An appeal to the court having jurisdiction was contemplated, but the idea was, on consultation with an able attorney, dismissed as impracticable. Mr. Morse had never been an hour behind in his payments. I had nothing to offer as a reason why he should be

supplanted in his position as trustee but a strong impression. At last I resolved to leave this part of the country and go to some place where I could work out my fortune, the one my mother had left me seeming to my disordered brain already lost.

"Two days before I was ready to leave I went with a friend to Mr. Morse's office and was allowed to inspect the securities in which he had invested my property. I noticed that they were kept carefully arranged and filed, in a wrapper of light brown paper, tied with narrow blue tape. The idea seized me of preparing a package exactly similar in appearance and bringing it on a subsequent visit to substitute for the original package. I procured some sheets of white paper, some wrapping like the one I had seen, and some tape of the same description, and went to Mr. Morse's office with the false package in an inside pocket. Being allowed freely to inspect the bonds again I succeeded in putting them inside my overcoat and leaving the false package in their place. When I left Stromberg at noon on that day I carried away the bonds. I supposed no further harm would result than a little annoyance to the trustee, whom I intended to inform of my trick when his trusteeship should expire.

"Last summer it came to my knowledge that Paul Gardner, alias Herbert Brown, had been arrested, tried and imprisoned for the supposed theft of these bonds, and had escaped from custody. I learned also that Mr. Morse was doing his best to procure the rearrest of Gardner and that my wild act had caused and was likely to cause still more pain and suffering to wholly

innocent people. My first thought was to invent some way by which I could restore the stolen property to the trustee, in whose honesty I had then come to have implicit confidence, without compromising myself. But at last I saw that my duty involved more than that, and that the only way I could wholly right the injured was to make a full confession of my guilt.

"At the instant I was about to do this, in the presence of Mr. Morse, of my partner, Mr. Whiteley, and of Mr. Keith, Paul—actuated by a nobility of soul which I can only think of with wonder and admiration—tried to save me by taking my offence on himself, in return for some slight assistance I had been enabled to render his family. I at once came here from California and placed the true statement of the case before the Governor, which resulted in his speedy pardon. Then I surrendered myself to the authorities. I am here, ready to accept whatever penalty your Honor sees fit to impose.

"In stating my case to you, if I have seemed to offer anything in mitigation of my act, I beg you to discharge that from your mind. I ask no mercy, for I deserve none."

Elsie Gardner was sobbing softly under a thick veil she wore, but to her sister's whisper that there was still hope she replied, "It is not that, Mannie! I would not change a word he has uttered."

The prosecuting attorney rose to his feet when the prisoner had returned to the dock and said with ill-concealed emotion that he had no remarks to make. There was a silence more oppressive than ever when

the judge announced that he would postpone sentence until the morrow.

As Mr. Hall came out of the dock a hundred hands were stretched to grasp his, but he declined them all, with a shake of his head and a smile, till a little figure, leaning on the arm of Paul Gardner, pressed against him. Lifting her veil Elsie showed him her tear-stained face an instant; and then, before all the crowd, she stood on tiptoe and kissed the man!

The judge, who had stayed in his chair, turned his face away to hide the moisture in his eyes. Several of the sheriff's assistants hemmed to clear obstructions in their throats. Everybody in sight of the episode was affected.

"They named you right when they called you *Victor*," said the girl, bravely. "I never was so proud of you as now!"

The officers led him away and the courtroom was slowly emptied of the lingering throng.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A CHANGE OF VENUE.

AND now, my dear readers, for a little confidential talk. When I say that the judge, on the reassembling of his court the next day, sentenced Mr. Hall to the minimum imprisonment which his plea of guilty allowed—that of one year at Joliet—you are not going to believe that “our hero” served the whole time. Novels are not written in that way as a rule, and after all this is a novel and not a true history. So I may as well admit right here that the Governor pardoned him and that he (Victor, and I hope the Governor also) expects to “live happy ever after.”

There are other characters in this story to whom a few words must be devoted. Let us begin then, with Richard Morse. Stromberg has gone to the opposite extreme from its old attitude toward the insurance man, since Mr. Hall was released from confinement with his sanction. The people have come to realize that he has merely shown unbending adherence to duty. They know that even now he would oppose any attempt, should one be made (and none will be) to terminate his trusteeship of the Martha Hall estate, one hour before the time stipulated in that lady's will; and that he is probity personified, with determination

of the highest kind behind it all. All Stromberg realizes that no more upright citizen dwells within its borders.

His fellow townsmen are transferring all their insurance to him, as fast as it matures, and his only rival in the local business has been obliged to give up his office. Not only this, but five widows and six maiden ladies have executed wills appointing him their executor and trustee, and three have been so obliging as to die, leaving large estates to his care. "As honest as Dick Morse" has passed into a proverb. But he goes on in the even tenor of his way, as unspoiled by adulation as he was uninfluenced by criticism when he knew he was right.

Marian is happy in her married life. She loved her husband all the time and now she adores him. She does not regret his great tribulation, since he came out with honor untarnished. Her brother Paul is studying law with Mr. Hall, who has established himself again at Olluma. Whiteley had the bad luck to lose his fortune in speculation and has quit the town in disgust. His half of the gold mine was bought by Mr. Hall, and is now managed, together with the half that was made over to the Gardners (and which no persuasion will induce Victor to take back) to the great profit of all concerned. Indeed, as every reader will be glad to hear, they are growing wealthy out of the proceeds.

Mr. Sewall continues to live the same unselfish life as of yore, giving aid and counsel to all who need it for miles around. It is not believed he will ever ask

another woman to be his wife, but he finds compensation in the happiness he brings to tired and desolate souls.

Jakey is a strong, fine lad, whose chief regret during the past year has been that he was not old enough to enlist in the army. His opinion of "gals" is still contemptuous, notwithstanding the fact that he has two of the loveliest sisters in the world, and he announces solemnly that he shall *always remain* (he is now fifteen) a bachelor. If he thinks one man on earth superior to all others it is Mr. Hall. He came home one day looking like a hospital patient from Luzon, on account of an altercation with a lad considerably bigger, who had "sassed him" by saying that two of his friends were "jail-birds."

"But yer oughter see de odder feller!" he exclaimed proudly, when duly decorated with court-plaster. "Dere ain't enuff o' *him* left for a crowner's inquist!"

Jakey still drops into his old style of speech when excited, but usually succeeds in mastering that disagreeable habit. He wants to please Mr. Hall and the latter's "My boy!" is quite sufficient to stifle the tendency to slang on all but special occasions.

To return to Victor: As he passed through the doors of the State Prison, on the day his sentence went into effect, he remarked to the keeper that he was glad it was the same penitentiary in which Paul had served and that he would do his best to make a good record there. He donned without a murmur the convict's garb and went cheerfully about the labor

to which he was assigned. He was at last where he fully believed that Justice required him to be.

A sad party of his friends went the next week to have an interview with the Governor, who had no hesitation in assuring them that he thought further punishment could serve no useful purpose and that he was ready to issue a pardon whenever the prisoner would apply for it. Elsie attracted His Excellency's attention especially, he having been made aware of the broken romance in which the girl figured. The second great Tanner of Illinois called her to his side and questioned her closely.

"It is customary to ask some one to be responsible for a convict who is released before his time," he said, gravely.

"Ah, sir! It was the one error of an upright life," she answered. "You are quite safe not to demand that in this case."

"I do not like to break the rule. If you have such confidence in him, my child, you ought to be willing personally to furnish his guaranty."

"I?" she cried. "Would you take *me* for security?"

"Who could be better? Unless I am much mistaken, too, he would prefer your guardianship to that of any one else."

She dropped her eyes in confusion at the unmistakeable meaning of the words.

"If Mr. Hall wishes you to take charge of him, you will not refuse?" he persisted.

"No, sir; not if he wishes it," she whispered softly.

There was a light in the eyes she raised to the official that told him how gladly she would accept such a trust.

"Then it is settled," said the Governor, kindly. "Go to Joliet, tell Mr. Hall the conditions under which I will grant his pardon, and see what he says."

All agreed, after consultation, that it would be sheer folly to move in the matter yet. Victor's frame of mind demanded at least a short term in his present location. To begin now might defeat the scheme entirely. So the Gardners went back to Chicago, where they waited for the slow days to pass, all but Jakey, who plunged with delight into the gaieties of the city, as represented by variety shows and soda fountains. When a month had gone by they began their campaign.

The first thing was a letter from Mr. Morse. He related what was entirely true at the time, that his business was suffering from the public impression that he could have mitigated the penalty of the imprisoned man. He asked if Victor wished to still further injure him. If he continued as he had begun he (Morse) might as well close up his office and remove to some new locality. The townspeople blamed him for the sentence of the judge and were not disposed to listen to explanations.

Mr. Hall read this letter with deep sorrow and replied that he regretted the state of affairs exceedingly. But instead of intimating that he would apply for a release he renewed his request that Morse accept the

\$40,000 he held in trust, or at least the income of it, as a partial recompense for his pecuniary loss.

On hearing of the failure of this plan Paul tried his hand, using a more peremptory tone:

"It should occur to you," he wrote, "that you are occupying a selfish position quite at variance from your usual character. While enjoying the pleasure of 'expiating your fault,' you cause others to suffer severely. I had made up my mind to study law, but no one cares to take a young man but recently released from prison, even if it has been proved that he was innocent of the charge against him. Were you free I should hope to join you at Olluma and commence under favorable auspices. You have uttered some warm expressions of sympathy for me. I shall see now how real was the sentiment behind them."

This troubled Mr. Hall more than the other letter, but it did not convince him. He wrote to Paul that the income from the mine was quite sufficient to support him for the present and that there must be openings for a determined youth in some of the newer sections of the country. He intimated further that the real reason for Paul's efforts was not the one he alleged.

There was nothing left but to try Elsie's persuasions. If these failed, they all admitted nothing could be done. Victor was called into the office one day from his work, and in his prison clothes was left alone with the little woman.

"You are not glad to see me, I am afraid," she said, as he stood trembling, without even offering to touch her hand.

"After the wrong I have done to you and yours I cannot look you in the face."

"Victor," she said, after a pause (she had never called him by that name before), "I have been talking to the Governor about you. He says if you are released from prison—as we all want you to be, so much!—it can only be conditionally. Some one must be responsible for you and surrender you to the authorities if you ever again break a law of the State."

He turned toward her with a gasp and cried, feelingly, "I could not ask any human being to take such a responsibility as that!"

She leaned toward him and whispered, "*No one—not even me?*"

He drew a long breath and again averted his face for an instant. Then he straightened himself up and addressed her.

"Elsie! You know I am not at heart a bad man! You know the strange events that led me into the devious paths which brought me to this prison. If you wish to shorten my term you can do it easily! I ask you, in these convict's clothes, in this disgraceful building where I am undergoing a righteous sentence—will you be my wife? If you consent to marry me—after I have expiated my fault and can face mankind again—the hours will fly on the wings of happiness and hope."

The maiden took a step nearer and held out both her hands.

"If I accept you, Victor," she said, "I cannot wait a year. If you want me, take me now."

He hesitated still.

"Will you give me a day to decide? Oh, the temptation is so great!"

"And you are not sure?"

"Yes!" he cried, clasping her to his breast. "I will ask for my pardon at once!"

When this was decided and a few more words spoken such as might be expected in such circumstances, Elsie asked if she might see the cell in which he had slept. She hoped this would be the last time she would ever be within the walls of a prison and she had a curiosity to inspect the interior. He called his guard and they went through the corridor, Elsie shivering frequently at the evidences of force and strength seen on every side.

"Did Paul have to sleep in a place like this?" she asked, as they came to his little bedroom.

"Yes, my darling, for more than two long years. Do you think a few weeks enough for a man who caused him that suffering?"

"Oh, you're not to be set free, understand," she responded, laughingly. "You are to be under my supervision."

"That is what I call 'capital punishment.'"

The guard had orders not to hurry them. He discreetly walked to the other end of the alley and left

them quite alone. Sometimes even a jailer has an element of romance in him.

"Do you know you proposed in the first letter you ever wrote me?" Elsie asked, presently. She drew a faded sheet of paper from her pocket. "This is what you said:

'I shall be delighted to place myself at your service, in any way agreeable to you, now or at any other time.'

"I don't see how anything could be more agreeable than marriage," she explained.

"But you had told me the day before that you never should marry—that you had 'seen too much of it!'"

She laughed again, saying he had a prodigious memory. "You're not going to back out of the offer you've made me to-day, are you?" she added. "If you do, I shall certainly surrender you to the police."

He said he had something he wanted to show her and, rummaging in his trunk, brought out a package tied with ribbon, which, on being opened, showed the dried crumbs of a lunch long since prepared and a yellow sheet of letter paper.

"That's what you gave me when you thought me a tramp."

"And you didn't think it good enough to eat!"

"I thought enough of it to treasure all these years and to bring with me to this lonely cell." Then he read aloud the letter she had sent with it. "I am like a girl on an island, which ships only pass once in a long

time, and I have to wave my handkerchief to the first one I see."

"You're not the only 'ship' I've seen since that was written, though," she interrupted.

He touched her ripe lips with his own.

"And yet, you love me, sweetheart?"

And yet—I love you!"

THE END.

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